

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MANDATES: THE CHALLENGE
FOR IOWA'S SMALL SCHOOLS

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By Thomas N. Lane
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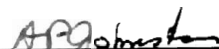
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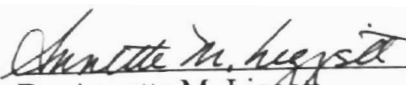
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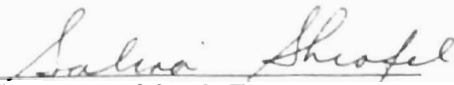
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Approved by Committee:


Dr. A.P. Johnston, Chair


Dr. David Darnell


Dr. Annette M. Liggett


Salina Shrofel, Ph.D.
Dean of the School of Education

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MANDATES: THE CHALLENGE FOR IOWA'S SMALL SCHOOLS

An abstract of a Dissertation by
Thomas N. Lane
March 2004
Drake University
Chair: A.P. Johnston

The problem.

The problem of this study was to describe how educators from Iowa's small districts understood the intent of House File 2272 and how they implemented that legislation. Further, this study sought recommendations from educators for legislators to consider in making future policy. This was one of seven studies of 2272 sponsored by the FINE Foundation.

Procedures.

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study to gather contextual perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, data transcribed and coded, and district documents collected and reviewed. Site reports were provided to participant districts to serve as a member check.

Findings.

Cross-site findings included: (1) while accepting the intent of increased accountability, educators suspected legislative biases against small schools; (2) leadership provided the supports to facilitate successful implementation; (3) HF 2272 did not hinder community relations and perhaps enhanced them; (4) assessment became more formalized and districts more data-driven; (5) barriers of time and money existed, but change issues and teacher turnover were also formidable; (6) unintended consequences included increased educator workloads, a narrowing of curriculum, and a perception that policymakers disrespected educators; and (7) a call for greater voice for educators in future policy decisions was heard.

Conclusions.

Conclusions drawn: (1) efforts prior to 2272 paved the way for successful implementation of that law, (2) central office leadership was key to implementation, (3) going beyond compliance required addressing barriers skillfully, (4) legislative intent and suspected motive sent conflicting messages to educators, (5) adaptation was a way of life in small schools, and (6) policymakers must provide resources if deep reform is the goal.

Recommendations.

In the broadest terms, educators wanted legislators to understand that if the legislature was to reform education in Iowa, they had to first gain a significantly more refined understanding of schools and the governance of the system that they wish to change. As important, to make a convincing effort that their efforts were not just politically motivated, they had to show support for the reform effort.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose	2
Problem Statement	4
Research Questions	4
Limitations	5
Definitions	5
Research Note	6
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	8
Accountability	9
Standards-based Reform	12
Policy Implementation	14
Leadership	21
3. METHODOLOGY	26
Introduction	26
Selection of the Districts	28
Selection of the Participants	30
Data Collection	32
Data Analysis	34
Coding	35

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	36
District A	36
District B	58
District C	84
Across-District Themes	105
Prior Activity	105
Leadership	106
Community	111
Barriers	112
Intent vs Motive	117
Unintended Consequences	120
Advice to Legislators	123
Summary of Then and Now in an “Active” District	126
5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	130
Summary	130
Conclusions	132
Implications	136
Recommendations to Policymakers	139
Recommendations for Further Research	140
REFERENCES	142

APPENDIXES

A. Interview Protocol: Teacher Version	153
B. Interview Protocol: Administrator Version	155
C. Interview Protocol: Board Member Version	157
D. House File 2272	159

List of Figures

	Page
Figure	
1. Interview Analysis Procedure	33

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

According to Joetta L. Slack, “Accountability has become the watchword in recent years for state legislators looking for ways to reform K-12 education and hold schools, educators, and students responsible for showing results” (Slack 1999, p.1). Gone forever are the days of skilled educators entering the classroom with feelings of trust and freedom to do what their training had prepared them to do. This transition was especially difficult for Iowa educators. As the last remaining state still fighting the local control battle, the action of the 1998 legislature in passing HF 2272 into law (HF 2272: Accountability For Student Learning Act) left many educators feeling a loss of trust, confidence, and pride in their profession. Iowa’s 371 school districts were faced with the task of implementing state mandated accountability procedures that forced districts to develop school improvement plans with strict guidelines, to develop standards and benchmarks for student learning, and to report test scores and other indicators of improvement to the state and local communities using uniform formats. Even though the ideas involved were not new, the requirements of 2272 would prove to be a Herculean task for everyone.

Concepts of accountability, continuous school improvement, and periodic revisions of goals were concepts with which Iowa educators were quite familiar. During the 1980s, many school districts across the state had implemented activities, developed staff development programs, and organized committees to meet the requirements of Sections 280.12 and 280.18 of the Iowa Code. These mandates served as the first statewide efforts to address school accountability issues, but they were interpreted and implemented broadly and in accord with the traditions of local control—which provided considerable latitude in implementation. The

2272 requirements, in terms of uniform procedures and uniform test data reporting, suggested a sea change in state-local relations and a new and considerable pressure on local school districts.

In the short space of one decade, the business of educating children had become a quite different undertaking. Along with the difficult tasks of teaching and administering, practitioners were now being asked to perform in ways that were unfamiliar, respond to the state in previously unthinkable detail, and carry out their normal work of teaching children with no additional time or resources.

It was a daunting task for even the largest districts with considerable resources: for the state's smallest districts it appeared overwhelming. Of the 371 school districts in the state of Iowa, nearly 20% had fewer than 400 students in grades kindergarten through twelve. Larger districts with their multiple administrators, assessment and curriculum specialists, department heads, and financial resources were often hard-pressed to meet the mandates put in place with HF 2272. Already strained, Iowa's small districts were mandated to conform with the exact same standards as districts with much more specialized personnel and many more resources. Whether totally intentional or not, when policymakers issue mandates, the underlying rationale is that consistency is required in order to achieve the goal of accountability (Firestone, 1989). Aside from the dubious rationale of the argument (Bok, 2001), the required consistency was difficult for those without a deep bench in human and financial resources to implement.

Purpose of the Study

This study was an exploration of how 2272 was understood, how the required work was accomplished, how the process was facilitated, and what barriers these districts found to

the implementation process. The intent was to provide a voice for educators in small districts through which to recommend policy that would provide accountability that the state needed but that would also help districts accomplish legislative ends in a more efficient and effective manner.

It was hoped that through this study, a better understanding of the challenges small school educators face could be brought to light in an attempt for policymakers to better understand the concerns and hear the voices of educators in these schools. Through this research, small-school teachers, administrators, and board members had the opportunity to share the stories of their policy implementation efforts. Insights were gained that might assist other small school educators and hopefully also policymakers as they rethink and rewrite legislation.

If it were the intent of Iowa legislators to create equity through mandates that would level the playing field for the state's children, the state's long-standing political culture would enthusiastically embrace that intent (Johnston & Liggett, 2002). But it was the interpretation of these mandates, the actual implementation by the small school districts, and the district willingness and capacity to enact that law that required more exploration. This research sought to understand what was happening in three of Iowa's small school districts as they worked their way through the requirements of HI 2272.

Looking at the impact of mandated legislation on Iowa's small districts was of particular importance as 75 of the state's school districts housed student populations of less than 100 students K-12. Two thirds, or 247 of Iowa's 371 public school districts, saw decreases in enrollment, marking the sixth consecutive year of declining state-wide enrollment and a decades-long slide in enrollment in many rural districts. This news was not

a surprise to state leaders. Graduating seniors were outnumbering the incoming kindergarten classes, and U.S. census information was predicting the trend to continue. But small towns were not looking to consolidate with neighboring districts and risk the loss of their local school buildings. Rather, communities were seeking any means possible to enhance the opportunities for maintaining their identities. Oftentimes Iowa's small communities viewed their identities as revolving around the local school.

The legislated mandates made no exception for size, resources, or expertise. Iowa's small districts were forced to meet the same criteria in the same way as the state's largest districts regardless of resources. No district was exempted from the process. A major question surrounding the implementation of HF 2272 in small districts thus became whether small districts could adapt to state policy, or if state policy could be adapted to fit small districts.

Statement of the Problem

Iowa's small districts faced challenges that put into question their very existence, not just for the school itself, but also for the small town or towns that made up the local district. The problem of this study then, was to learn, describe, and understand how the educators from Iowa's small districts understood the intent of the legislation and how they planned, and implemented House File 2272. Further, this study sought recommendations from educators for legislators to consider in fine tuning or altering existing policy and making future policy.

Five research questions guided this study:

1. How did HF 2272 change what districts were required to do?
2. Did small districts have the necessary resources and skills to implement HF 2272?

3. What was the process used in small districts to implement HF 2272?
4. In your opinion, why did the legislature enact HF 2272?
5. What recommendations do you have for legislators regarding future policy design and implementation?

Limitations

Three of Iowa's small districts were examined to learn how each dealt with the implementation of HF 2272. An accurate portrayal of the perceptions of practitioners in these districts was the goal. The researcher's own experiences working in similar sized districts hopefully allowed for insights, and especially since biases were as inevitable as they were closely guarded, information was gathered, examined, and reported with as much care as the researcher could muster. The intent of this study was to clearly and accurately relate what was happening in these three districts as their educational teams worked to implement state mandates. No generalizations were made to larger districts or even to those of similar size. No effort was made to compare, evaluate, or seek cause in this study. Rather the study focused on exploration into how implementation took place and what it looked like in three small districts. Nevertheless, it was hoped that implementation issues in these three districts would provide a window through which policymakers could see and better understand educational accountability and school improvement in small districts.

Definition of Terms

APR: Annual Progress Report. This is a document due annually on September 15, by the state of Iowa. This report must be sent to the Department of Education and shared with the local community. It profiles district-wide progress made in attaining student achievement

goals in academic and non-academic areas. District-wide efforts in reaching locally established student learning goals are presented.

CSIP: Comprehensive School Improvement Plan. The CSIP is a plan developed by all local school districts in Iowa. This plan demonstrates school, parental, and community involvement in assessing educational needs, establishing local educational standards and student achievement levels, and as applicable, the consolidation of state and federal planning, goal-setting, and reporting requirements.

FINE Foundation: First in the Nation in Education Foundation

House File 2272: Accountability for Student Learning. This act requires the State Board of Education to adopt rules pertaining to the accountability of student achievement into the education standards and accreditation process.

Mandates: A set of rules designed for educational practitioners with the intention of producing compliance.

School Improvement Process: A process developed by school districts to determine student learning goals in compliance with HF 2272.

Small: School districts described as “small” will mean a total district enrollment of less than 400 students.

280.12/280.18: Legislation encouraging local districts to develop district-wide communication and participation in the development of student learning goals.

Research Note

This policy implementation study was one of seven conducted through Drake University which explored Iowa’s 1998 state education accountability policy, House File 2272. These studies were supported in part by funds received from FINE: First in the Nation

in Education – Iowa’s Educational Research Foundation. The findings were intended to inform policymakers about how policy initiatives impact local educators in a wide range of school settings. What all districts had in common was that (1) they had to implement the policy and (2) they all had a reputation for having planned for school improvement prior to the law having been passed. In total, it was hoped that these studies would provide insight into how the state might improve its policy-making capacity in education.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this review of literature is to provide an historical context and conceptual framework to the research and to assist the researcher in making sense of and explaining the data gathered in the field. A context-setting introduction is followed by literature on accountability, standards-based reform, policy implementation, and leadership. All of these were helpful in thinking about and making meaning of what was discovered in each of the three districts involved in this study.

Historical Context of School Reform Thinking

In 1984 the Department of Education described in A Nation Responds: Recent Efforts to Improve Education the tidal wave of reforms that occurred in response to the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report of the previous year, A Nation at Risk (Passow, 1989). This report provided an array of reform initiatives which included broad changes in programs such as vocational education and business/school partnerships as well as management changes in site-based management, and the need for a technological revolution. In general there were two unifying themes in reaction to this report: more rigorous academic standards for students and higher standards for teachers. Activities at the federal, state, and local levels after publication of A Nation at Risk focused on fixing aspects of the current system of American education (Passow, 1989) by means of policy-led reforms.

The movement by the 1990s and into the early 21st century had shifted towards performance based accountability. In her research on standards based accountability, Goetz, Duffy, & LeFloch (2001) found that the driving notion underlying this reform was based on the belief that since " student performance is cumulative.... a system of collective

responsibility” is required and that an understanding of this dynamic “will encourage school staff to work collaboratively” (p. 42). They maintain that “performance based accountability systems focus not only on the level of student performance, but on the progress of students and schools toward meeting state standards” (p. 46). When respondents for this Iowa-based study were being interviewed, these two broad ideas, accountability and standards-based reform, were being propelled by a state policy that capitalized on both. This review will further explore their underpinnings as well as accompanying ideas required for implementation.

Accountability

In its current form, the performance-based accountability movement has a short history, being introduced in the mid 1980s, by then Arkansas governor Bill Clinton at a National Governors Association meeting. Amendments to Title I legislation in 1994 requiring states to create performance-based accountability systems for schools strengthened the movement. Since then, a merger of state and federal policies around this concept has become a focal point for today’s accountability reforms (Elmore, 2002a). The most recent reauthorization, currently operating in fewer than half the states, mandates a single test-based accountability system. According to Massell (1998), a key assumption of this approach to school improvement is that performance information will drive change because the rewards and sanctions embedded within it will motivate teachers and schools to improve. Debray, Parson, and Woodworth (2001) believe that public reporting of student performance would make community stakeholders uncomfortable or unhappy enough for them to pressure schools to do better. Clear, intelligible standards, in this view, is a strategy to encourage higher achievement when aligned with appropriate assessments. Standards, and assessment of those

standards, will make schools accountable and in this way accountability will become the heart of school improvement (Rosenholtz, 1991; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

As an explicitly political idea, this style of accountability lacks practical implementation planning and is fraught with technical difficulties (Elmore, 2002b). Sirotnik (2002) describes a responsible accountability system as one where evaluation of student learning is based on professional judgment using multiple indicators, both quantitative and qualitative and spread over time. He states, “No modern organization would ever use a lone indicator to judge the worth of its operation” (p. 665). Mandated, point-in-time measurements provide very limited indicators of student and school performance (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby 2002). Consequences, rewards, or sanctions designed to acknowledge those schools and educators who achieve at a high level and to admonish schools, practitioners, and students who are showing little progress are not productive ways to change behavior, according to these authors, either for individuals or for groups (Sirotnik, 2002). Timar and Kirp (1987) summarize this way: “Excellence cannot be coerced or mandated. Rather, it is a condition to which individuals may aspire” (p. 309).

A well-known outcome of test-driven accountability is the narrowing of what gets emphasized and how it gets emphasized in the curriculum. Numerous studies have shown that parents want much more for their children than what is assessed on standardized tests (Sirotnik, 2002). In a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (Rose & Gallup, 2001), nearly two-thirds of the respondents thought student learning should be assessed by the day-to-day work in classrooms, including homework. Cohen and Hill (2001) believe the public wants and deserves to know how efforts to change schools affect teaching, learning, and the well-being of students in their schools.

In the view of these scholars, the focus on external accountability is an unenlightened view of what it takes to improve student learning. Internal accountability, namely school personnel who share a coherent, explicit set of norms and expectations about student learning must precede external accountability (Elmore, 2002). To insure successful implementation, any significant change must be preceded by time for planning, implementing, and institutionalizing (Crandel, Eiseman, & Louis, 1986). Fuhrman (1999) found that capacity-building efforts must attend to internal norms about accountability. The ability of a school to improve is based not only on performance information, on what in common parlance of the day is called data-driven decision-making, but also from the beliefs and practices of those in the school. Increasing student achievement is aided by knowing current performance levels, but “what to do next?” centers around improving the knowledge and skills of teachers. Teacher command of content and how to teach it and in helping teachers to better understand students’ academic development (Elmore, 2002) are key to successful use of data to improve teaching. The circle has to be completed: research has shown that in the long haul, it takes better teaching to produce better results (Sirotnik, 2002).

The enthusiasm for performance-based accountability threatens to transform the standards and accountability movement into the testing and accountability movement. As critics have pointed out, a simple model of correspondence between knowing test scores and increasing achievement is naïve. Rather, says McLaughlin (1998), policy has to work through professional communities to effect deep change. Teachers must have the “opportunity to talk together, understand each other’s practice, and move as a community to visions of practice . . .

If teachers are not learning together, reflecting together, examining student work together, changes in governmental structures . . . will likely mean little in terms of student outcomes. . . .

What is most important to restructure. . . are the relationships among teachers and the organizational conditions that support discourse and strong community” (p. 81). These exchanges, these supporting networks, must take place not only within schools but across schools and school districts.

The support for more challenging tests exists everywhere, and while administrators view them as supportive of good instruction, these views also “coexist with criticisms of the tests” (Massell, 2001, p. 160). Care must be taken to insure that new accountability systems are well-supported from the point of view of human development as well as well-designed with fair, comprehensible, meaningful and stable features that encourage sustained capacity-building (Fuhrman, 1999).

Standards-based Reform

The standards movement is arguably the major force in education today, and the significance of the standards movement could be huge. Historians may identify the last decade of the 20th century as the time when a concentrated push for educational standards emerged (Glaser & Linn, 1993). The promise of the standards movement is contingent on clear and commonly defined goals. The core assumption embedded in this approach to reform is that individual and collective energies are unleashed through a well-articulated focus accompanied by curricular and assessment alignment. A common focus, it is argued, accelerates communication, clarifies understanding, and promotes a shared purpose (Rosenholtz, 1991) so that subsequent alignment can occur. Rosenholtz (1991) believes that “the hallmark of any successful organization is a shared sense among its members about what they are trying to accomplish. Agreed-upon goals and ways to attain them enhance the organization’s capacity for rational planning and action” (p. 13). In contrast to this view, a

perceived state of chaos was the impetus for the standards movement with the most visible manifestations being mandated state standards.

While standards in most school districts are very similar, it is a delusion to believe that a common, coherent program of teaching and learning is in existence (Schmoker, 2000; Marzano, 2000). At the ground level of instruction there is chaos rather than consistency. A major issue is the amount of information there is to teach—arguably two to three times too much (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1996). Even within the same school district teachers make independent decisions regarding what should be emphasized and what might be left out (Doyle, 1992). Such practices make it totally possible for holes to exist in the knowledge base of students even if there were a commonly agreed-upon set of knowledge and skills that every child should know by grade level.

From these perspectives, the good intentions of standards-based reform have contributed to the very problems they were intended to solve (Schmoker, 2000; Marzano, 2000). “Less is more” we keep telling ourselves. Students learn more when we teach less—but teach it well (Dempster, 1993). Yet Wolk (1998), found many of the standards documents generated by state policymakers to be written in “absurd” language and to contain such quantity that 10-hour teaching days would be necessary to cover all mandated material.

In addition, understanding that it is easier to add than to delete, the sheer number and nature of policies, often poorly integrated, has led to poorly written standards that almost no one can realistically teach or hope to adequately assess. Derek Bok (2001) has noted that policy generally has caused untold problems in implementation because it is piecemeal and uncoordinated. It can only have the effect of prompting an uncoordinated response. In this sense then, some of the same mistakes that had taken place at the local curricular level in

developing curriculum were repeated when developing policy for state standards (Schmoker, 2000; Marzano, 2000), that is, a triumph of the ideal on paper over the classroom realities of what's really possible. In this situation, especially accompanied by high-stakes testing, policies produce palpable tensions in schools and classrooms.

Policy Implementation

Since the 1970s American educational policy has shifted from equity to excellence, from needs and access to ability and selectivity, from regulation and enforcement to deregulation, from the common school concept to parental choice and institutional competition, and from social welfare concerns to economic and productivity concerns. Most of these shifts have been driven in whole or in part by state and federal policy, the many strands of which created numerous policy chains made up of policy and regulatory code designed to control implementation procedures. Thus "policy implementation" became a part of our working vocabulary in the early 1970s when these reform efforts were described as "implementation problems." This was a transfer in thought process from a belief that implementation was a boss/subordinate issue, to a broader concept that touched not only multiple levels of government but got right to the grass roots of those impacted by the implementation process (McLaughlin, 1987). Over time, scholars came to see implementation as a developmental process at least as much as it was a question of "ordering" from above. This was evident in that, despite several decades of legislated reform, classrooms, teachers, and instruction looked much the same. Seymour Sarason (1988) noted that the issue runs deep because organizational dynamics of school systems are entrenched and reflective of the society that has both created and nurtured them. If so, in this view it will

take time and considerable commitment to make things look different in America's classrooms.

After early policy implementation researchers focused on identifying problems and defining the parameters, a second generation of researchers sought to zero in on the relationship between policy and practice. An overriding conclusion throughout that empirical research is that policy implementation is difficult and complex. Reform is easier for politicians than for implementers. According to Cohen and Hill (2001), "the state can have an effect, but success depends on making connections among the disparate parts of the system and the parts that deliver" (p. 10). But they note, all "reformers have to work within the existing system, [and] that system is often a powerful threat to that reform" (p. 155), a factor that requires careful study of the intrasystem relationships if there are to be reasonable predictable outcomes.

Given this as the current state of the educational policy system, therefore, policymakers can't simply mandate what matters (McLaughlin, 1987). Both experience and prior research has led to two additional critical factors: local capacity and will. Policy can address several capacity issues such as money, time, and training. For example, Bay, Reys, and Reys (1999) found assuring teachers the time needed for reform a critical form of administrative support. But even then, according to McLaughlin (1987), today's program consequences often are eroded by tomorrow's realities: "staff move, new students come in, resources evaporate, other demands compete" (p. 176). Under these conditions, a one-shot or even a single year of staff development is not realistic.

As difficult as finding resources to support capacity-building may be, will is even more difficult as it addresses the motivation, attitudes, and beliefs that implementers must

bring to the policy intervention. If will is already there, so much the better. Indeed, the best predictor of how a school will respond to state policy is its organizational culture when the policy becomes effective (Elmore, 2002). "Motivated professionals," those who possess the will to implement. Elmore continues, "generally make every effort to do their job well" (p. 174). In fact, nationwide research is clear that many of the new state standards enacted during this era of reform had already been met by local districts prior to state legislation (Fuhrman, Clune, & Elmore, 1988) simply because the locals had the will to do so. This was consistent with the much later findings of Clune (2001) and Hannaway and Kimball (2001) who stated that "past experience in reform was a strong predictor of current success" (p. 269).

Successful implementation efforts have generally required a combination of pressure and support from the policy itself (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1982; Fullen, 1986; McLaughlin & Pfeifer, in press; Montjoy & O'Toole, 1979; Zald & Jacobs, 1978). Pressure alone is limited to situations where no additional resources or changes are required to facilitate implementation. When support is ignored, attitudes, beliefs, and current practices of those left to implement can only be assumed. Support alone is also limited because of potentially conflicting priorities that exist within the implementing organization. Ambiguous or weak guidelines may allow for competing coalitions to shape policy to fit their ends (Kimbrough & Hill, 1981). Pressure focuses attention on the reform effort, while support serves to enable the actual implementation process.

Detailed studies of the implementation process teach us that "change is ultimately a problem of the smallest unit" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 174) and the importance of the "street level bureaucrat," (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) where policy success is dependent on the grassroots implementation conducted by the individual at the end of the line. Elmore (1980)

states "the system is bottom heavy and loosely coupled. It is bottom heavy because the closer we get to the bottom of the pyramid, the closer we get to the factors that have the greatest effect on the program's success or failure" (p. 25). He further states "The closer one is to the source of the problem, the greater one's ability to influence it; and the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control but on maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate" (1979-1980, p. 605). Cohen and Hill (2001) found "complex causal links between state and federal agencies on the one hand and street level implementers on the other" (p. 6).

This leaves the focus of the implementation not with the institution, but rather with the value systems of those individuals entrusted at the most critical implementation level. "In short, teachers will make most of the important discretionary choices in the implementation [of program]" (Elmore, 1980, p. 22). Following this argument from a variety of researchers over two decades would suggest that deep reform requires attention to the will and capacity of implementers all along the policy chain.

A quite separate issue deals with the efficacy of a mandate as seen from the "street level." Johnson and O'Connor (1979), for example, took exception to earlier assertions that teachers in particular might be seen as lazy or anti-change. Rather these two researchers recognized teachers as trying to implement change within the classroom while still providing the best learning opportunities for their students. In Stone (2002), teachers asked that designers (lawmakers) "stand in the shoes of the target and ask, How does this rule affect me?" (p. 300). Cohen and Hill (2001) suggested policymakers are often not well informed "about the effects of their endeavors; they make no attempt to learn systematically about how their reforms played out in school and classroom" (p. 187). In some cases teachers chose to

institute fundamental change in their classroom practices by tacking reform on to existing ways of doing things (Cohen & Hill, 2001). Fairman and Firestone (2001) found “The evidence to date suggests that most teachers incorporate only some aspects of the standards into their practice and that the changes they make typically center on the content of lessons more than on the instructional strategies or goals for student learning” (p. 126). The hesitancy to implement as planners had envisioned might signal their concern that new practices are not as effective as the ones currently in place.

An additional lesson learned about policy implementation is the fluidity of the event. Bay, Reys, and Reys (1999) noted, “Making major curricular change is like bicycling in the mountains; you work hard to master one challenge only to meet another” (p. 504). McLaughlin (1987) stated, “even the best planned, best supported, and most promising policy initiatives depend on what happens as individuals throughout the policy system interpret and act on them” (p. 172).

Following the line of reasoning that implementation is evolutionary rather than a top-down ordering, Majone and Wildavsky (1977) make the point that environmental (local) issues for both the institution and the individual practitioners make implementation an on-going process where every action can potentially change meaning. As the process unfolds, new challenges emerge. The failure to recognize hidden constraints during the planning stage, only to have them discovered well into the implementation phase was found to be particularly troublesome. Elmore and McLaughlin (1982) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) identified a sequence of unfolding events in the implementation process. Only after the compliance issues of understanding the external policy variables of what is to be done, then learning the requirements for determining programming can implementers move on to internal quality

issues such as motivation and commitment. While this process may fluctuate, understanding must precede commitment.

Even in best-case scenarios, policy effects cannot be guaranteed. They are typically indirect and must operate through already existing settings. Even a well-guided single policy missile has little hope of changing the system by itself. Policy is transformed and adapted both to and by the implementing organization. Thus, local implementations will add contextual meaning from the immediate “dailiness” of the local setting (McLaughlin, 1987). This perspective highlights the individual rather than the institution and frames implementation issues as capacity building and belief systems of the individual. Implementers at all levels of the process then seek to negotiate and reframe their responses as new problems or challenges to the process manifest themselves over time (McLaughlin, 1987).

Further, and particularly important to this study, Hannaway and Kimball (2001) recognized that while larger districts might have some personnel expertise that smaller districts could not afford, it was equally understood that larger districts “may not be as nimble as smaller districts in responding to pressures for change” (p. 102). They also saw the necessity of specialized help: “the findings draw attention to the special challenges of reform faced by small districts and call for targeted assistance to these districts to pool resources and acquire specialized help when needed” (p. 120). It could be argued that locally defined change is often for the best. Local response may actually provide what reformers need, rather than what they want (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The more marginal, incremental changes attended to by implementers may far outweigh the “slam dunks” that policymakers expect. Decades of implementation research suggests that a “slam dunk” view of policy is a simplistic

view of the world, and as scholars have warned in many ways, the policy and policy implementation regulatory apparatus must be as simple as possible, but not simpler than necessary to get the results desired. The research vigorously suggests that, more often than not, deep pockets and considerable patience are required to support school reform as it winds its way through the layers of authority, capacity, and willingness of the system.

The last link in the policy implementation chain is that of assessment, a similarly complex and difficult activity. Determining outcomes may be dependent on the point in the process under study. Care must be taken to examine change from the total contextual environment, rather than in isolation. Lessons must be taken from the individual character of the institution studied. As Cronbach (1982) quipped, “generalizations decay” and by their very nature, policies have to be general—but also sufficiently specific to guide assessments to determine if the policy was effective. Policy squares off against the experience in schools of staff moving on to new opportunities, changes in leadership, and competing demands for limited resources. This constantly changing environment requires adaptation after adaptation, new hands and old policy working together to manage a steadfastness in the midst of change.

Finally, linking the macro and micro levels of policy implementation analysis provides the challenge for the next generation of researcher (Lerner, 1986). The macro level emphasis on the regularities of process and the organizational structure is at odds with the street level practitioner as they go about the daily realities of implementation, often with insufficient guidance to interpret policy intent. On the other hand, practitioners and micro level analysts have traditionally provided limited guidance to policymakers, as their focus tends to ignore organizational consequences or system-wide effects of a policy and concentrate on more

individual aspects of the process. The two perspectives have to be integrated for effective policy result to occur.

Leadership

A very consistent feature in implementation research speaks to the importance of leadership throughout the chain of implementation. In the matter of both state and federal policy implementation, the local district central office has come to be seen as key. So much so that without the active participation of district leadership, not much is likely to occur. In a study of federal policy, Hasazi, Johnston, and Liggett (1994) cited an informed observer to make this general point: "Unless you have commitment at the top [administrative level] the whole thing can't go" (p. 502). Similarly, Rosenblum and Louis (in Fairman & Firestone, 2001) found that "superintendent support was a key predictor of successful implementation" (p. 134).

The effect of the central office is so strong, it appears in these cases, that in their large-scale and decade-long study in California, Cohen and Hill (2001) found only moderately strong association between principals' knowledge of reform and school's overall effort to change. This does not suggest that other leadership is not important in implementation, but it does suggest a crucial role from the top. Firestone (2001) provides a clue as to why this may be true. The active and visionary leaders grab on to policies that will help them further what they wanted to do in the district anyway. "[W]hen the key decision makers have a propensity to act in a certain direction and see the policy as contributing to their own goals, they will implement it aggressively" (p. 134).

Aside from leadership position, styles of leadership are also important according to the leadership literature. There is a variety of classifications of these styles, but four categories or

approaches to leadership found in the literature suggest a general landscape of leadership theory: charismatic, where the senses of vision and mission are of great importance; inspirational, where the provision of symbols to focus effort is apparent; intellectual stimulation, in which rational and careful problem solving is important; and individualized consideration, where the treatment of each employee is particular to his/her needs. Lesourd, Tracz, and Grady (1992) added the category "visionary" to Bass's four preceding roles. In the visionary role of transformational leader, one would see evidence of strong personal convictions, rigorous work ethic, innovative practice, and personal image of the future of the organization.

Much of the emerging leadership research for school administrators that is particularly relevant to this study has focused on transformational leadership. One of the strongest advocates of transformational leadership, Burns (1978), defines transformational leadership in action as "when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality . . . their purposes become fused" (p.20). When such leadership is evidenced, significant change can occur within organizations. For example, transformational leadership has been known to liberate capacities of organization membership (Conger & Kanungo, 1988b), to increase commitment to organizational goals (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Fernandez, 1993a), to stimulate extra effort on behalf of the organization's mission, and to provide greater job satisfaction (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Motivated individuals generally make efforts to do their jobs well (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 174). But Bass, Waldman, Avolio, and Bebb (1987) suggest that transformational leadership might look "different" dependent upon the style or approach adopted by leadership. Similarities justify a type of leadership, but not all leadership within a type need be exactly the

same. In the broad context of the leaders who founded this country, for example, Ellis noted that what even the most committed democrats among the “founding fathers” did was somewhat a function of the circumstances in which they found themselves: “inherited circumstances define the parameters within which...leadership takes place” (2000, p. 185).

Notions of leadership and vision are closely intertwined. Leaders are paradigm pioneers (Barker, 1988). These individuals craft the future through their vision. They do not wait for it to happen. In a study of 12 highly effective educational leaders vision contained two dimensions (Sheive & Schoenheit, 1987). An organizational vision, created by the leader focused on the specific outcomes they wished to see developed in their schools. Secondly, these leaders professed a universal vision that transcended the local condition and articulated their general philosophy of education.

Transformational leaders motivate their followership by assisting them to higher order psychological needs, needs for esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization (Sergiovanni, 1990). Followers are inspired by focusing on moral questions. Transformational leaders know what counts to most people is what they believe, how they feel, and the social bonds they form (Etzioni, 1988). Transformational school leaders build commitment in their teaching staffs, a commitment to a set of purposes and beliefs about teaching and learning, and a vision of what the school district can become (Sergiovanni, 1990). Poplin (1992) sees this commitment as the primary duty of an administrator—administrators as “servants of collective vision,” as the bedrock that undergirds their multiple day-to-day duties.

According to Senge, this type of leader is a continual learner. As a type they have a passionate commitment to changing the way they and others think and conduct business (Senge, 1990). These leaders not only manage themselves well, but understand it is self-

management that allows them to tend to the needs of others. This positive self-regard allows them to extend involvement in the school's improvement to teachers, parents, and students (Barth, 1990)

In other work (Silins, 1992; Leithwood et al., 1993a; and Leithwood et al., 1993b), six practices have become associated with transformational leadership theory. These six practices are defined and their effects briefly explained:

1. **Identifying and Articulating a Vision.** Practices on the part of leaders aimed at identifying new opportunities for the school, as well as developing, articulating, and inspiring others with a vision of the future.
2. **Providing an Appropriate Model.** Practices on the part of leaders which set an example for others to follow that is consistent with the values the leaders expose.
3. **Fostering the Acceptance of the Group.** Practices on the parts of leaders aimed at promoting cooperation among teachers and assisting them to work together toward a common goal.
4. **High Performance Expectations.** Practices that demonstrate the leaders' expectations for excellence, quality, and/or high performances on the part of others.
5. **Providing Individual Support.** Practices on the parts of leaders that indicate they respect others and are concerned with their personal needs.
6. **Intellectual Stimulation.** Practices on the part of leaders that challenge others to reexamine some of their own assumptions about their work and to rethink how it can be performed. (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, p. 9).

Transformational leadership is about vision and working with others. It is about respect for people while allowing for and encouraging the growth of others. Influencing people to willingly work for groups is the central concern. It is not necessarily focused on the power of the leader, but rather with empowering others. Emphasis is placed on growth, as opposed to control. It is shared leadership, wherein school leaders, regardless of formal

leadership roles, use multiple strategies to change the culture of the school in school improvement efforts (Brown, 1993).

Not all leadership is or even should be transformational, but when the politics that govern education call for serious, sustained and deep reform, it is transformational leadership that seems most called for and against which the leaders in this study will be benchmarked.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Qualitative research methodology was selected for this study to learn about the dynamics associated with the implementation of state mandated HF 2272 in three small Iowa school districts. Creswell (1994) states, “Qualitative research is a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p.15). A qualitative approach emphasizes the researcher’s role as an “active” learner who tells the story from the participant’s view, rather than as an expert on the topic. The outcome is viewed as a process rather than a product (Creswell, 1994).

Qualitative researchers go to natural settings to attempt making sense of phenomena and the meaning participants attach to those phenomena. In these settings, multiple sources of information and narrative approaches are available to the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher serves as data collector, uses inductive analysis, builds meaning from the words of the participants, and uses expressive language to describe a process (Creswell, 1998).

A naturalistic approach was selected for this study because a qualitative design had a “built-in” flexibility that allowed for discoveries along the way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). By visiting practitioners in their natural settings, and by using the participant’s own words, a thick, rich description of the school improvement process was achieved. The strength of interviewing research is the worth we place on the participant’s stories. While it is never

possible for us to experience the context of another or to understand another perfectly, because to do so would mean that we had entered into the other's stream of consciousness and experienced what he or she had (Schutz, 1967), through the use of open-ended questions the researcher was able to elicit complex constructs from the participants.

Judging the validity or truth of a study rests on the researcher showing that he or she has represented the multiple constructions of reality adequately and that this interpretation is credible to the constructors of the reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Regardless of the researcher's best intentions, and because of the very nature of the interview process, interviewers risk becoming part of that process. Not only does the researcher frame the questions to be asked, but they may respond or even share their own experiences. Dedication and discipline on the part of the researcher are necessary as the acts of selecting the data to be used, interpreting the data, and analyzing it may not negate the interviewer's role in the process (Mishler, 1986). No matter how diligently the researcher strives to have the meaning of the interview be a product of the participant's reconstruction and reflection upon events, it must be recognized that to at least some extent the meaning is a function of the participant's involvement with the researcher. The dutiful researcher must recognize that interaction, and work skillfully to minimize its impact (Patton, 1989).

Trustworthiness was addressed in this study by including artifacts from each of the participating districts in addition to the semi-structured interviews. Though the interviews served as the primary source of information, pertinent documents such as improvement plans, staff development programs, and progress reports to district stakeholders enhanced the trustworthiness of data. Policy implementation practitioners at the local level intentionally included participants at varying levels of the implementation hierarchy. Member checking with all participants as well

as review of preliminary drafts throughout the study with the Dissertation Advisory Committee also addressed the issue of trustworthiness. As a companion study to several others in conjunction with the FINE Foundation, this researcher met on a regular basis with others involved to discuss and review findings. Additionally, an audit trail including tape recordings, field notes, transcriptions, researcher notes, and district documents was maintained and available for external audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher's personal experience and biases were critical in the subjectivity of this research. Those biases were identified early on and addressed through conversations with the research team and the dissertation committee. Effort was put forth to negate the researcher's perspective, and rather to focus on the data (Peshkin, 1988). However to ignore the researcher's previous experiences and bias would do disservice to the reader.

This research was designed to understand the strategies and influences surrounding implementation of HF 2272 from those who participated in implementation efforts and from those who were regarded as knowledgeable about the process. The guidance of Wolcott (1990) regarding collection, compilation, and analysis of data was valuable in development of the final report. The focus of the report itself is directed to those who read the report and to facilitate understanding of how implementation of state mandates could be conducted.

Selection of the Districts

This study was conducted in three small Iowa school districts. It is important to note that this study was undertaken in conjunction with several other policy implementation studies of HF 2272. Therefore the criteria used in site selection of the three schools needed to be consistent with the criteria used by the other researchers. Districts chosen for this study were identified by others or were perceived to be "actively" engaged in the school improvement process even before state mandates made such efforts mandatory. According to Fuhrman et

al. (1991), districts that are considered to be “active” in the school improvement process are usually not sitting around waiting for mandates to be imposed upon them. Instead they develop and implement policies around their district’s needs long in advance of any state policy mandates.

A list of educational elites was generated to assist in the identification of school districts who fit the “active” definition (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002). Two Department of Education representatives who make numerous site visits to school districts and are active in the reviewing of school improvement plans were asked to generate lists of small districts that fit the “active” definition. Three Area Education Agency representatives who again had personal knowledge of school district efforts at reform and who also were active in the review of school improvement plans were asked to provide the names of those small districts they viewed as “active.” Finally, three school officials known to the researcher, including superintendents and curriculum specialists were contacted to help identify small “active” school districts.

Lists of active school names were received from two Department of Education consultants, several AEA staff, area superintendents, and curriculum directors. Three criteria were used in the selection process for this study. First, a district must meet the definition of “active” as determined by the research team. Secondly, the K-12 student population must not be greater than 400 students. Finally, because of the researcher’s geographical limitations and a desire not to overlap with geographical regions in a companion study, only schools in central and west central Iowa were considered for this study. A total of twenty school districts were recommended by the knowledge elites. The lists received from these persons were then compared and the number narrowed to school districts that were mentioned on the lists

provided by at least three of the knowledge elites. Any personal relationship between the researcher and the participant schools was not criteria for the site selection.

Selection of the Participants

In each of the three districts, interviews were conducted with people who were knowledgeable when it came to the ground level implementation of HF 2272 (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). These included: teachers, curriculum and assessment personnel, superintendents, principals, and board members. Purposive sampling was used in all three districts to insure that those interviewed had a working knowledge of the district's school improvement efforts and had some history in the district. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) qualitative researchers choose purposive sampling when individuals are needed who are involved in or have knowledge of the process being studied.

It was understood that school districts with less than 400 students might limit the pool of available participants for this study. The definition of "active" was particularly helpful in this size district, as small districts are often limited in their more specialized personnel such as assessment director or curriculum specialist. By the very nature of being "active" these districts had participants wearing several hats in that a principal or veteran teacher may double as the curriculum specialist.

Two criteria were considered in determining the number of participants for this study. The first was sufficiency. Every attempt was made to include sufficient numbers to reflect the range of interests of the district populations. The second consideration was saturation of information, or knowing when the researcher had reached the point of no longer hearing new information from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Early on in the research design it was decided that eight participants per district would likely meet both of the desired criteria.

While larger districts would employ specialists with generally one identified area of expertise, smaller districts would offer those individuals who performed multiple tasks and therefore offered more diverse perspectives within the district community.

Initial contact with the superintendent of schools was made over the phone. During this first conversation a very brief description of the study was given and a request for a personal visit by the researcher to the school district was made and scheduled. The superintendent was the primary source in identifying those district stakeholders who would make the most valuable contributions to this study. During the personal interview with the superintendent, a list of possible knowledgeable within the district was generated. The superintendent was asked to make a final list of participants to include: superintendent, school board member, principals, curriculum/assessment people, and several teaching staff.

Enough data must be collected for triangulation. Creswell (1998) describes triangulation as the process of "collecting enough corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective," (p. 202). Additionally, the superintendents were asked to provide artifacts that spoke to the district's school improvement efforts. The CSIP, Annual Progress Report, and any other materials that depicted district initiatives were requested.

Since each stakeholder group brought a different perspective to the implementation of state mandates, a slightly different protocol was deemed necessary by the research team. While quite similar, each stakeholder group had its own set of questions. An interview protocol was developed by Lindaman and Wulf (2002) and was used to guide the interview process. The three versions of the interview protocol can be found in Appendices A, B, and C.

To allow for practice with the interview protocol, and to further enhance interviewing skills, several practice interviews were conducted using all three sets of interview questions. An administrator, curriculum director, school board member, and classroom teacher all assisted with practice interview sessions. These practice interviews were not used in this study, but allowed the researcher to become more comfortable with each protocol and to make slight adjustments in how questions were asked so participants did not feel a sense of being asked the same question several times. During the practice interviews, four main research questions were asked. A question about recommendations for future policy design by legislators was asked as a follow-up question under research question four. This question later became the fifth question in the research study. Slight changes in the wording of several questions arose from the practice sessions, and allowed the study interviews to flow more smoothly.

Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Based on the practice sessions, it was assumed interviews would last between 40-50 minutes depending on the knowledge base of the participant. It was clear some participants were more knowledgeable about the process than others. These interviews were semi-structured worldview interviews as defined by Kvale (1996): interviews “whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena.” Five primary questions were the focal points of the interview with probes and follow up questions serving to allow for a conversational flow that allowed for flexibility as each participant brought a different view to the interview process.

Superintendents were asked to provide each participant with a copy of the interview protocol prior to the interview session. It was hoped that this would facilitate a preparedness to speak directly to the issues of interest.

After each interview, notes were taken to highlight pertinent information that may not have been caught on the audio tape. Following each site visit, researcher notes were written and later used as an additional source of information. These notes also served the researcher as a way to capture thoughts or to make connections that might occur over the course of the interview sessions. Further value was derived from the researcher notes as a means of recording the relationship that the researcher had with the participants. While the researcher did not participate in the events as a partner, little effort was made to distance himself from the experience. Field notes then became an invaluable tool in not only constructing representations of the experiences reported by the participants, but also as a way of keeping the researcher mindful of the participant/researcher relationship (Sanjek, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988).

Documents and other relevant data sources were collected from the district superintendents the day of the interview sessions. Documents aided in the qualitative research because "the information provided may differ from and may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight" (Hodder, 2000, p.704).

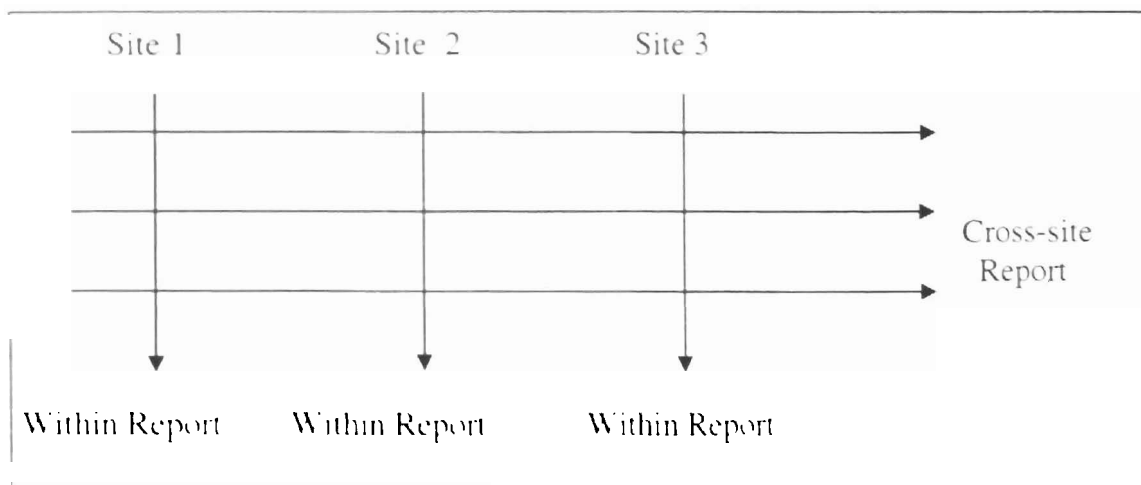
Participants in a research project have the right to informed consent prior to participating in the project (Christians, 2000). During the initial contact with the superintendents, issues pertaining to informed consent, confidentiality, permitted withdrawal from the study, and member check were explained. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a brief overview of the study. A consent form was given to each participant to

sign, demonstrating their willingness to participate in the study. Assurances were given with regard to confidentiality, and participants were told they might refrain from answering questions if they so chose. Once transcribed, interviews were returned to each participant to check for inaccurate information or to allow them to edit their interview to more precisely reflect their perception at the time of the interview. Human Subjects approval for this study was gained under the auspices of the FINE Foundation proposal.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed in two ways. Even during the earliest stages of the study, each site was analyzed as its own set of data. This somewhat lightened the overwhelming task of data analysis at the end of the data collection (Miles & Huberman, (1994). Data from each site was analyzed and a site report was written for that individual site. After the completion of all site reports, the researcher began the process of looking across the site reports for emerging themes. Figure 1 below illustrates the data analysis procedure.

Figure 1. Interview Analysis Procedure



Coding

Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to the process of manually coding data as open, axial, and selective coding. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe the development of themes and sub themes as the constant comparative method. An on-going effort was made to code transcripts as they were completed in an effort to guide subsequent interviews as well as to look for emerging themes. A systematic process of analyzing textual data described by Tesch (1990) provided the model this researcher chose to follow in identifying major and minor themes in the data. The goal of this researcher was to take apart data in an effort to reassemble it back into a larger, consolidated picture.

Information provided by the school districts, such as Comprehensive School Improvement Plans, Annual Progress Reports, and other pertinent artifacts were also reviewed to better understand the values participants brought to the interview experience. These data sources were rich in portraying the values and beliefs of the participants within the setting, while allowing the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the context through unobtrusive means (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Chapter 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter includes descriptions for each of the three school districts included in this study. Following the descriptions, findings for each site are presented by major themes pertaining to the school district implementation of House File 2272. Concluding the chapter is a cross-site summary and discussion of the study findings. This summary and discussion includes the researcher's observations and a comparison of study findings with previous policy implementation research.

District A: The Community

District A was a small rural community in close proximity to major interstate highways and surrounded by thriving Iowa cities all within a mile radius. The town's population had grown by nearly 12 percent over the last ten years. School children were served in a single, K-12 structure located in the center of town. Students were bussed in from a surrounding rural area of 69 square miles.

Because of its location, District A patrons had access to many commercial and industrial services as well as numerous cultural and entertainment activities. The town had organized two community-based groups to foster services and economic development. The community, as a means of attracting businesses, had put Tax Increment Financing in place. A seventy-acre tract of land had been purchased by the city to accommodate future housing needs and business start-ups. Iowa Open Enrollment statutes allowed parents to choose which school districts their children would attend. District A greatly benefited from this law as they had four times as many students enrolling into the district as they had going out to other districts. The student population was very homogeneous (nearly 100% Caucasian), with not

enough students in any one sub-group to necessitate the reporting of standardized test data to meet either state or federal mandates. The district chose not to report this information in Annual Progress Reports.

District A was very proud of the individual attention afforded students. Ninety-eight percent of all students graduated, and 96% planned to go on to some type of post-secondary training. Over the most recent three year period, 76% of District A graduates had completed a state defined "Core Curriculum" including four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies. Students completing this core curriculum scored slightly below the state average of 22.0 on the American College Test (ACT). Students not completing the recommended core courses scored considerably lower.

The district participated in The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and The Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Proficiency scores in math, reading, and science compared favorably with Iowa norms and exceeded national.

Extra-curricular activities attracted eighty-four percent of District A's high school population, with 94% of junior high age children participating. The closeness of the teaching staff with students and the connections made with parents were cited as critical elements in engaging students both academically and through activities. In the district's most recent Iowa Department of Education site visit, District A was described as, "the central meeting place for the community. The school functions as the hub for the entire town."

District A: Findings

Intent of the Law

When asked why they thought that the law was passed, the consensus in District A was that it clearly had to do with the concept of accountability. Other concerns such as the

setting of minimum standards, improvement of student learning, the reporting of standardized test scores, issues with small school districts, and federal pressures were also mentioned, but the override for everyone was that accountability was the primary focal point of the mandate. Both the superintendent and school board member spoke at length about how the idea of accountability was not necessarily new to the district and talked extensively about some of the earliest district efforts to become more accountable to their community, and how 280.12 and 280.18 legislation had considerable influence on their school improvement efforts. Both of these provided them with a real “head start” on their implementation of HF 2272. The curriculum director stated, “It seemed like we were always testing the waters and were in on many early initiatives long before the provisions of 2272 came about.”

Communication about the Policy

In District A, participants learned about the passage of the new law and its intent through a variety of ways. How each person first became aware of the new legislation seemed to depend somewhat on the role they held within the district. The superintendent recalled some communication from the Department of Education, later followed up by the Area Education Agency and other notifications came from the Iowa Association of School Boards and the School Administrators of Iowa.

Other participants remember learning about HF 2272 through sources such as the newspaper, state associations, but primarily through both oral and written communications from the superintendent. A young teacher who started in the district in 1998, somewhat sheepishly reported, “My first year here was sort of jump right in, sink or swim, focus on my classes. I don’t think I remember hearing about legislative mandates or 2272 in particular.” This teacher went on to report that it was not until the following summer when she attended a

summer institute with some colleagues that she started to make the connection between the new accountability law and what she was supposed to be trying to do in her classroom.

Other administrators and teaching staff within the district, as well as the school board member all reported being very comfortable in relying on their superintendent to not only keep them apprised of the new law's requirements, but to also serve as the "point person" for the district in the implementation process. "The superintendent does a great job of being proactive and being an educational leader. He is a wonderful resource for small school districts across central Iowa, and throughout the state. He makes us the district we are," stated the high school principal. Other interviewees in this district echoed similar sentiments.

Prior Activity

There was little frustration expressed by interviewees regarding the implementation of HF 2272 or how it got started in their district. Comfort with the legislation was apparent with all of the participants. Earlier efforts at school improvement caused most to view HF 2272 as an extension of what they had already been doing in the district. The board member stated, "I think we were already in the process long before HF 2272 ever came about. I think we were already on the road to school improvement." Throughout the district, the sentiment of bringing programming together, "so it wasn't just out there standing alone," was expressed by several participants. The curriculum director reported, "I think it was passed so that we all would be measured in the same way. Whatever challenges that ended up causing for some small districts, I believe it was accountability for all schools in the same way." The superintendent supported his perspective of federal pressures by stating, "A lot of this was a result of federal government warning the state of Iowa to become more accountable to them. Prove to us why what you are doing works, when you are not doing what we want you to do."

Impact of 2272

Participants voiced distinct impressions about how they believed their individual roles shifted as a result of HF 2272. The elementary principal stated, “I now have the hard data. It’s not just a feeling that we’re doing well, not just that our parents are telling me we are doing well. Now I can base decisions on data we can look at.” These sentiments were similar with others in the district as they described their vivid memories of the district’s climate, expectations for student achievement, and the earliest efforts at school improvement.

The superintendent of District A was described by another area superintendent as, “. . . the best small school superintendent in the state.” It is clearly apparent that the other participants also held him in very high regard. The high school principal stated, “Our superintendent knows House File 2272. He knew what we were already doing, and he knows how to continuously make us better. Even if there were no legislative mandate, I think we’d still be progressive in doing things right.” Long-time veterans of the district often went back to 280.12 and 280.18 as their personal starting points for school improvement. They viewed that legislation as the impetus for sweeping change within District A.

It was at that time that they reported really starting to look at where they were as a district and where they needed to be heading. In fact, when describing the culture of their district prior to 2272, an historical perspective was of major importance to many of the participants, especially those who had spent many years employed in the district. For several, it was the only job they had ever known. One elementary teacher reported, “I was so happy just to get my first job. Happy to have a job anywhere. I remember telling my dad that I’d only be in District A until I saved enough money to go to Colorado. That was twenty-eight years ago. Can’t seem to save enough money I guess.” The high school principal while describing his superintendent as a “workaholic,” went even further stating, “it’s the only place

he's ever been. He started as a teacher, went to principal, now he's the superintendent. He loves education, he loves kids, and he wants to get better. And he's never settled for second best."

Many of the veteran staff not only gave their superintendent much of the credit for the district successes, but also remembered being included as parts of school improvement teams initiated by the superintendent. For several of the participants, a watershed event was a workshop sponsored by the AEA, called "Putting It All Together." One of the introductory activities was to draw a visual representation of where their district was with school improvement. After several comments about hating these "touchy feely" things, they began to draw. The elementary principal reported, "We started thinking, well we've got Phase III over here and we have staff development here. Here is our support system with special education and TAG and School-to-Work over here." The drawing began to resemble a cake. The enlightening moment for the group was that their end product did in fact resemble a cake, but a cake that had nothing tying it together. As the superintendent presented the team's creation to the entire group of workshop participants he remembered District A's saving grace being, "the only thing that made us feel better about ourselves was that other districts had drawings of people running into brick walls. At least we didn't feel like that." This event was the catalyst for going back to the district and beginning the conversations as a school district about what it took to become an effective and vital educational system. The end product of this process was the development of a school improvement model that is still used today and was proudly displayed throughout the K-12 building. It was at this point that the district stopped looking at academic achievement in a purely intellectual sense. It became very clear to them, that if the social, emotional, and behavioral pieces were not addressed, they were not

going to have academic successes with students.

A popular term in the district was “chunking.” Both the curriculum director and assessment coordinator viewed this technique of breaking down the mandates into small, understandable, manageable pieces as critical to their own personal successes in dealing with the teaching staff. The curriculum director cited her own personal style in the presentations to her staff. She felt her background in language arts and her ability to outline were of particular help as she looked for ways to make things easily understood and meaningful to her teachers. The assessment coordinator believed her counseling skills and an effort on her part to make, as much of the implementation process “fun” was important in her successes with the process.

They both viewed the teaching staff being made up of people who had the expertise and skills to get on board right away, with several others who might need some assistance. Both believed they had good credibility with the teaching staff, in part due to the fact that their colleagues knew they both taught along with their more administrative duties, and that they would be needing to do the same things they were asking of teachers in their own classes. Both also admitted it was nice to know they had the “clout” of the superintendent if it was needed.

Community Involvement

The district had a long history of community involvement. The school board member, administrators, and teaching staff all made remarks about town meetings, open forums at board meetings, and requests from patrons for specific information. School Improvement Teams had been in place here for a long time. The Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) had been operational as far back as the late 1980s and had assisted with identifying and setting of district goals. As new legislation became law, the relationships and structure needed to

address those mandates were in place and functional. No one expressed discomfort about school/community interactions necessitated by HF 2272.

The superintendent had a particularly strong sense of the school community relationship when he shared,

I think like many schools in the state of Iowa, if you stopped ten people on the way home from work, nine of them will tell you we have a great school. Truthfully, probably nine out of the ten don't really know, or wouldn't have any justification as to why we are a good school. It's just a belief. One of the things we have always tried to drive home to our teachers is we have to be our own worst critic. We have to hold ourselves to the highest scrutiny, because they won't. They trust us that we are doing a good job. When you are a tiny district like this where a couple of people will handle all the math for a child from the time they're in ninth grade on, if you screw up, this kid is not going to have the skills they need. Whether it be math or science or anything, the bar is really high. I think that's why we've been able to raise people's level of concern, but at the same time, we've raised the level of pride that this is a huge job. This is a very, very important job that we've taken. And I think if we've done anything, we've raised the self-esteem in this profession that this is vitally important work that we do, and we are in a community that appreciates that and trusts us completely.

Implementation Barriers and Facilitators

Implementation of HF 2272 was understood and described in various ways by the study participants. Only two of the participants really addressed the "change issue" as being a big part of the implementation process. A secondary teacher, admitting that change was sometimes difficult for her stated, "I like knowing what's going on. I like to have a voice in what's going on. It's important for me to know if I'm going to make changes in my classroom, who is saying I need to make changes, why are they saying I have to make changes, and are these things really important to my students?" Being involved during various stages of planning and implementation were very important to this participant

The superintendent also saw change not as a barrier to the implementation process, but rather as something that needed to be understood and addressed. He chose to describe the

change process as similar to observing loss. He made sure that he identified the similarities for his staff, and even went so far as to describe the stages the teachers and administrators might find themselves in. They talked about this as a staff. And they did it several times, often laughingly talking about being in a “denial stage, or a grief stage.” But there was also a very real understanding that not all people would change. A senior administrator talked about, “not watering the rocks. Water the flowers, the plants will grow. Don't waste your water on the rocks because there ain't nothing that is going to grow there anyway.” So for the one or two, maybe three teachers in the entire district who resisted the implementation process, they were basically allowed to be “outliers.” The main discomfort they felt was described by the secondary teacher as a product of the small, intimate nature of their district. “I wouldn't call it peer pressure, but if everybody else is pretty much on board with an idea, we do try to encourage other people to come on board with us.” The implementation emphasis was placed on the doer's, rather than wasting time or expending energy fighting with the very minimal resistance.

The administrative team and board member all discussed their thoughts about what the implementation process for 2272 should look like. The over-riding theme for all was that the focus must remain on what was best for the children. Compliance with the law was important, but certainly not going to be the driving force for this district. The expectation was that administrators would focus on the compliance issues, while teachers were expected to not only improve their own skills and grow professionally, but further use their new skills to improve student achievement.

Other study participants chose to describe the inclusionary process they felt was used to build support for the mandates of HF 2272. The belief that quality must come from within

rather than be mandated at the state or federal level was professed by a school board member in this way, “The community must come together. You work as a school board, you work as an administration, and you work as a staff to get the community involved so that they become a part of the decision-making process. All the mandates in the world aren’t going to make a difference. I think it has to come from within.”

There was great pride exhibited by the staff who were truly proud of the small, intimate setting that allowed for all teachers K-12 to become genuine colleagues. They saw each other every day, they shared the same teachers’ lounge, and they knew all of the district’s children. The curriculum director described the district in this way: “We are like a family. If something happens to an older child, it affects all of us. Many of us had that child as a student years before.” But like all districts, participants recognized that care must be taken to create and maintain the valued relationships and that even in a small, intimate, one-building district teachers could become isolated. Prior to school improvement initiatives, several long-time veterans of the district remember, “teachers being in their own rooms, making their own curricular decisions.” Committees with representation of multiple stakeholder groups allowed the district to build those relationships they feel were so critical to their success.

Prior Activity

The superintendent recognized the strength and effectiveness this intimacy could have for his staff years before when the district set up staff development time to allow for all K-12 teachers to work together for the first 30 minutes of every workshop day. The community had also easily accepted that school was dismissed for two in-service days a month during a three-month stretch in the middle of the school year. Because the district had been committed to school improvement at a very early stage, the mandates of HF 2272 had very little impact on their lives. Their small teacher population had allowed them, for a long time, to make

changes very rapidly. They'd previously met the challenges of declining enrollments, societal expectations, and curricular modifications. They all had great confidence in a district leader who had come up through the ranks with many of them and who had been so successful in so many other initiatives. When the superintendent told his teachers, "We're going to do what we believe is right for kids. That's our first and foremost priority. We'll be compliant. But compliance to me is the minimal, that's the least important thing. I'll deal with the compliance. You deal with what's good for the kids," they believed him.

Other respondents were able to cite several factors they saw as critical elements to their success of either being well ahead of other districts in the implementation process, or in allowing them to adapt to HF 2272 so easily. Money was mentioned numerous times by staff, administrators, and a board member. Grant monies from such sources as Goals 2000, Success 4, and consortium money were used in partnership with Phase III dollars to allow for what teachers called "seat time" for them to attend workshops and work on curricular and assessment needs. Teachers expressed great gratitude for their opportunities to attend summer institutes, write standards and benchmarks, develop alternative assessments, and be paid for their efforts. The assessment coordinator reported, "They (the teachers) realized they were going to get the training they needed. They were willing to do it because it wasn't just giving up your time. They paid for seat time. They paid for workshop registrations. They paid for expenses." In this district the school board and administration made a commitment to financially reward staff for efforts directly related to the districts goals. It was greatly appreciated by the teaching staff.

Along with the financial incentives, time was also allotted for teachers to work on the district initiatives. But teachers were unanimous in their belief that they never had enough

time for their regular duties, let alone time to address new mandates. While teachers were satisfied with the understanding exhibited by administration about time constraints, they did oftentimes feel almost overwhelmed with what they were being asked to do. A secondary teacher stated, "It seems like you add things to your plate, but they never take anything else away. The plate keeps getting fuller." The superintendent empathized, "We'd like to have more time for people. We've been able to buy some time at night and in the summers. I don't think we could ever provide enough resources in regards to time for people." While not loudly complaining, many participants in this tiny district did openly refer to the many "hats" that not only they, but also their colleagues wore. Teachers talked about their class loads, coaching assignments, committee duties, and assorted other responsibilities. Administrators also taught, coached, served as athletic director and had their own "extra" assignments. Both the curriculum director and assessment coordinator served as a teacher or district-wide guidance counselor. So while time that was allowed both during the school day and after normal school hours or in the summer was greatly appreciated and well attended.

In fact, while the concept of barriers to school improvement was mentioned by all participants, it was not something they dwelled on at length. Having the sense of doing more with less on so many other initiatives made the implementation of HF 2272 business as usual for this staff. The obvious disappointments about the lack of time and money were typical responses. A perhaps more unique concern of this group was the attrition of teaching staff leaving to seek higher paying jobs both in and out of education. Spending the time implementing mandates only to have the high school math teacher leave created some challenges for this district. In this district one teacher could perhaps be the entire department. The curriculum director reported that both the high school and elementary principals had been

questioned by patrons about the number of staff leaving and how that was impacting the district. “I’ve had five resource room teachers in five years,” reported the elementary principal. So a lack of continuity was mentioned as a real barrier to continued improvement. The high school principal believed that the district’s proximity to Des Moines allowed them to attract candidates for jobs that other small districts in more remote rural areas of the state might not be able to hire. He saw this as a real advantage for the district.

The last piece of the support system for implementation of new mandates was the assistance received from the Heartland Area Education Agency in Johnston, Iowa. In particular, the district’s assigned partner from the AEA had a strong reputation with study participants as someone who was knowledgeable, and as someone who was always willing to jump in the trenches with them. The earlier work the district had done as part of a consortium in the development of district-wide achievement level testing (ALT) was a good fit for the mandates of HF 2272, and something that the AEA had been in on with the district since its inception. The curriculum director viewed the AEA in this way: “We’ve been pretty blessed with good AEA people. They have been vital partners in our staff development efforts.”

Other Districts are “Just Getting By”

Several of the interviewees wondered aloud how other small school districts that had not been actively engaged in school improvement initiatives could be coping with all of the mandates. While no one in this small school district expressed any concerns about the newly imposed mandates causing them to lose accreditation or to have to ultimately consolidate or close, they did marvel at some of the things they’d heard from educators in other districts. The elementary principal was especially vocal in saying, “I see other districts just getting by, going by the letter of the law instead of really making it a part of their curriculum, making it part of the testing program, and looking at those results and using them.” Several teaching

staff smiled as they talked about being at workshops and listening as educators from other small districts talked about working on their standards and benchmarks. These “other” teachers were describing activities they’d been engaged in for years. “It’s really a matter of quality, not size,” stated a school board member. Size of school did not determine a quality education in her opinion. She went on to say, “I think you have some very large schools that are very good, and some large schools that are not. I think you also have small schools that are very good. But the flip side of that coin, you can have some small schools that aren’t very good.

The over-riding sentiment about the efforts of other districts, regardless of size, was more amusement than anything else. They also voiced considerable pride in what they felt they’d accomplished over a long period of time. The focus for this district was clearly on what they had done, and how it was impacting the education of the district’s children. It did not appear that a lot of time was wasted worrying about what other districts might or might not be doing.

Leadership

Outstanding leadership was both recognized and appreciated in District A. Successful implementation was made possible not just through the more recent works of district leaders, but also through efforts that had been actively pursued years prior. Four main implementation leaders were identified throughout the interview process. Those four leaders included the superintendent, elementary principal, curriculum director, and assessment coordinator. Information gathered from participants targeted the role each leader played in the process, the challenges or responsibilities each leader faced, and the impact that person had on the successes of the process.

Little mention was given to the role of the board, other than the freedom and trust they

placed in their administrators to get the mandates implemented. The term teacher/leader was also absent from any conversation about the leadership process that took place. During some earlier initiatives such as School-to-Work and Early Literacy, teachers were identified as being very critical to the implementation efforts as the district chose to train skeleton crews who were then counted upon to come back to the district and share their knowledge. This was viewed as very beneficial to the district.

The greatest insight as to the roles and impact of each leader came from within the leadership team itself. One member of the administrative team who was not mentioned as part of the implementation process, except when it came to assisting with staff development duties was the secondary principal. This individual was very open and honest about the role he played within the district and readily acknowledged his willingness to take on other duties such as disciplinarian, part-time athletic director, and football coach in lieu of being called upon to lead something that he and others recognized as being responsibilities that had other leaders who possessed more expertise and interest.

The high school principal felt his board of education deserved credit for being supportive and expecting improvement. He acknowledged a strong superintendent who worked well with the curriculum coordinator, assessment director, and elementary principal. About the curriculum coordinator he stated, "We are very lucky to have her." The principal described his role as having changed over his five years in the district from a situation where he was in his own words "a figurehead" where he would sit up front during staff development time and "so that staff knew he was on board" send out the necessary e-mails. He reported having found some issues that had become academic areas of interest for him and cited his efforts in secondary reading. But he also was very honest when remembering in-service time

related to state mandate implementation. "It was driven by the curriculum director who had been here for a long time, plus so much was driven by the superintendent." The principal went on to say, "I think we are unique with our superintendent. A lot of other superintendents lead things through their building principals or through the curriculum directors. We all know you can ask anyone in here who is our educational leader, and they are going to point to the superintendent."

The principal was very comfortable with this relationship. He compared his relationship with the superintendent as almost a principal/assistant principal relationship where the principal handled the leadership duties and the assistant handled more of the management chores. He saw this assignment of duties as very beneficial to the district.

The curriculum coordinator also made it abundantly clear that she believed her charge was to do the bidding of the school board and the superintendent. She also had observed that even more of the school improvement work could be delegated to her, as the two district principals were currently involved with evaluator approval training. This was a role she relished and she spoke confidently in her abilities to make school mandates meaningful. She saw herself as a liaison between the superintendent and the teaching staff, with a responsibility to take what the superintendent gave her and, after presenting it to the school improvement committee, making it meaningful to teachers and ultimately students. She reported that, "We have been able to, not always with everything, but with most of the mandates to turn them into living, breathing kinds of things. I can do that because I really do that every day anyway."

She cited the small district size as a real asset in their efforts for reform stating, "We can just do things so much faster than a large district. With only one building, we would just

The top priority of this administrator was to assure that what the district was doing would be meaningful to student learning. He voiced this over and over. Of particular pride to the elementary principal was the work the district and he personally had done with achievement level testing. He felt that while actually identifying a benchmark, building assessments to measure student growth, and ultimately reporting progress to the public put more pressure on teachers, it was a valuable process.

The superintendent was very modest when describing his role in the district. But he also recognized his leadership role: "I've probably taken the lead role alone, because I felt it was my responsibility to do that." He viewed district level initiatives to be very difficult implementations for building principals to lead. He acknowledged their capabilities, but worried about all of the other responsibilities they juggled. He listed his curriculum coordinator as his main partner and credited her with outstanding staff development skills. The elementary principal and assessment director followed closely in his mind with the elementary principal leading the reading initiative. His team kept him apprised of their efforts and he clearly trusted their abilities.

The superintendent attempted to serve as a filter for what was mandated legislatively and what was presented to his staff. More and more he saw himself buffering what happened at the federal, state, and Department of Education levels before it reached the district's classrooms. He worried that if he asked staff to jump every time something came out legislatively, he would soon lose his credibility with the staff. He was frustrated with mandates, but understood the importance of compliance. His style was to work with his administrative team to work through new initiatives and then decide how to package it for staff so that it did not appear they'd headed off in some new direction. Every attempt was

made to see that mandates were adapted to fit the direction the district was already headed.

The superintendent espoused a leadership philosophy to his staff and community that was both powerful and insightful. He obviously had a tremendous sense of his own value system and worked diligently to mentor his administrative team and the entire district. He articulated the difference between managing and leading by stating, “Managing is a whole lot easier. I mean it’s mundane. Managing is safe. Leading is not safe. Leading is exciting!” He related a story about a good friend who had suffered a recent defeat in a local election. In attempting to console his friend he advised, and admitted he heard it somewhere before, “True leaders lead the minority. Because by the time other people have caught up, you’ve already moved on to another challenge.” He concluded by describing the loneliness sometimes associated with leadership. “You are out there by yourself, hanging out there. It’s one of those things you see, and it’s how you help other people to see the same thing.”

Intent versus Motives

While the general consensus in the district was that the intent of HF 2272 included both accountability and guidance for Iowa school districts, there were many who voiced displeasure with what they perceived to be the motivation behind the mandates. A direct attack on smaller districts, the state’s declining revenue position, an illogical belief in the value of standardized testing, and a disregard for the talents of teachers were all mentioned by study participants.

“They believe small schools aren’t as efficient,” stated a high school teacher. He went on to say, “They want to squeeze them. Can we make more hoops to jump through to the point that small schools will say, I give up? Let’s merge with somebody else.” This was a commonly shared belief by other respondents. The assessment coordinator added, “Sometimes I get the feeling that maybe it was just a logical way that instead of squeezing

them monetarily, you could squeeze them by overwhelming them. And sometimes as a small school, we get that feeling. We are just getting squeezed out of existence.” The high school principal viewed the mandates more a result of perception, advising legislators to “Get out of the perception business and into the reality business.” He did not view legislators as having the necessary insights to determine the quality of education being delivered in a school district, regardless of size.

Other participants tied the small school issue to finance and the economic environment. “I think that they (legislators) don’t think they can afford the number of districts in the state of Iowa,” stated a middle school teacher. This staff member showed a real sense of the importance of school size as she described her student teaching experience in a larger Iowa school district. “Things are so crowded! Kids are trying to find themselves. Big schools like that are trying to make themselves smaller in an artificial way. They make little groups with advisors and have family units so kids don’t feel isolated.” She continued, “We might be too small. Kids are together all the time. They get sick of each other.”

Many staff believed the Iowa legislature to be misled in their confidence in standardized testing. They professed a belief that several legislators had jumped on the federal bandwagon and over a period of time had built enough support to enact mandates. There was a strong belief that the legislature did not have a true picture of what goes on in the educational system, local school districts, or in individual classrooms. Perhaps the elementary principal said it best, “APR’s don’t tell them what they need to know. If a district’s curriculum does not align with the test questions of the ITBS, and some don’t very well at all, there is no way a student is going to perform well, unless he’s a really good student already. This test will not help you with student growth.” Other factors such as testing effort by

students, health of the student on testing day, nutritional environment of the child, and several other factors were felt by this educator to be huge factors in high-stakes testing, especially to Iowa's smallest districts where the performance of just a few students had such a huge impact on the grade-level scores.

The superintendent accused the legislature, with their emphasis on standardized testing, of forcing school districts to play what he calls the "Iowa Game." He believed districts were encouraged to get their children over the lowest bar. By getting just a small percentage more over that lowest bar each year, you were then deemed a good district. "The rules of the game are, we've got to be careful not to set our goals too high or we might miss the target and be told we are a bad district. So we set low goals, so when we make it, they tell us we are a good district," states this superintendent. He saw it, as the same game they've played in Texas, and feared it will soon become the "American Game."

A personal struggle for this administrator was the increased resources that must be spent to get just one more student over that lowest proficiency bar. With business leaders clamoring for a world class education in Iowa, the superintendent lamented, "What are we doing for the kids on the other end?"

Another unintended consequence in the eyes of these participants was the feeling that legislators had little trust in the talents of classroom teachers. "We feel like we're overly scrutinized or you're not getting the job done, is something we feel they must believe," stated an elementary teacher. But the superintendent saw the mistrust going both ways. "I think their (legislature) credibility is bad. They've carried too many messages to us and then reneged. They've come up with some really poorly conceived things. It's like what's next?" This superintendent reported seeing the same cynicism when sitting in meetings with other

superintendents. The superintendent concluded with, “There are things that legislators need to stay out of. I just know that good schools, good educators will do everything they can to help kids succeed. Given the resources, most schools will do a good job with kids.”

Advice to Legislators

Study participants did not hesitate to offer suggestions to legislators for possible improvements in future legislation. Some recommended educators have an opportunity to send feedback to them about current mandates, while others thought HF 2272 was flawed from the outset and reasoned this was due primarily to the fact that little input was sought from educational practitioners prior to enactment. An elementary principal offered this advice, “I would tell them to be concerned about what they want as a result. If there is a result that they want, a picture they have in their mind, then set that goal. Use legislation to set the vision of what it needs to look like and put some accountability with it. I don’t care as long as it’s fair. Then get the hell out of the way!”

A high school teacher agreed about getting feedback from educators and went on to voice her concern about unfunded mandates, “If they’re going to make mandates and ask for specific things they want done, make sure the money is there for it. If you don’t fund things, I don’t know how they expect to get it done or done well.” Others provided similar concern about state policymakers that require sweeping educational changes with little input from practicing professionals. The sense from this group was that they were constantly asked to do more, with less, and further, to make change by an institution that did not value their efforts. Some participants acknowledged that veteran educators might choose to leave the profession as more and more was asked of them rather than have to adapt to new mandates. The opinion was that perhaps this wasn’t all bad. But one young educator had another perspective: “People go into teaching because they like kids. They want to work with kids and make a

difference in their lives. I know I haven't been teaching that long, but it's kind of like some of the legislative things bring people down about why they teach. I wonder should I just get out now, before they decide to change things again?"

Several other participants asked that the legislature not put all of their eggs in the accountability basket at the expense of other child related issues. A guidance counselor offered her concerns, "Please take into account the fact that the students we are getting have more problems than ever before. They need more readiness opportunities. Pre-school has got to be a bigger concern for this state. Parenting skills are at an all-time low, and I don't see them getting any better." This same educator asked that legislators have "more realistic" expectations.

District B: The Community

District B was located in rural southwestern Iowa, nearly an hour's drive from the nearest metropolitan area. Once a county seat, this small town had lost that distinction to a larger, neighboring community many years earlier. Most district patrons were engaged in agricultural enterprises or traveled some distance for employment. A small factory on the edge of town was complimented by several businesses that lined the compact main street. The district's children were housed in an older, two-story brick K-6 building and a 7-12 facility just south of town. Nearly one in three students qualified for free or reduced lunch and eleven percent had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

About a decade earlier, the district had entered into possible sharing or consolidation talks with a larger, neighboring district. It was determined the district could continue to meet the needs of their children by operating independently. The student population was very homogeneous (nearly 100 percent Caucasian), with not enough students in any one sub-group

to necessitate the reporting of standardized test data to meet either state or federal mandates. The district chose not to report this information in Annual Progress Reports.

Over the most recent three year period, forty percent of District B high school graduates had completed a “Core Curriculum” of four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies. These students scored near the state average on the American College Test (ACT). Students not completing the recommended coursework scored considerably lower.

The district participated in The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and The Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Proficiency scores in math, reading, and science compared favorably with state norms and exceeded national. A number of other standardized assessments were given to the district’s children and later reported in the Annual Progress Report.

District B reported one dropout in grades 7-12 over the most recent three-year period. Students intending to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities had increased dramatically in recent years to a current rate of eighty-two percent. The district boasted a ninety-seven percent participation rate in extra-curricular activities for all students in grades 7-12. Parent involvement was valued in this district and evidenced in the opportunities for parents to serve on committees, work as volunteers in classrooms, and contribute through booster organizations such as music and athletics.

The most recent Iowa Department of Education site visit had been deemed a success, and was reported as such to the district stakeholders in the Annual Progress Report.

District B: Findings

Legislative Intent and Communication of 2272

The passage of HF 2272 in the spring of 1998 ushered in a new challenge for Iowa school districts. In District B, efforts were made to both become acquainted with the many aspects of the new mandated legislation and to educate not only staff, but also patrons about the new ways in which schools would be required to assess student progress and to ultimately report those assessments to all district stakeholders. District B participants reported learning about HF 2272 through several different means. A senior administrator believed his first knowledge of new mandates came through briefings with his AEA school improvement consultant while serving as an assistant superintendent in northwest Iowa. He also recalled his first comprehensive look at HF 2272 occurring during a winter institute hosted by the Department of Education. The secondary principal, also employed by another district during his first exposure to the new legislation, remembered serving on his school improvement committee and receiving reports from his superintendent.

Membership on a school improvement group was reported by all other participants as their first introduction to HF 2272. A school board member stated that she had decided to run for the board at a time when she had three young children at home, the oldest about to start school. At that time, about 1996, the district was already having conversations with a larger neighboring district about the possibility of some type of sharing agreement. She wanted to gain personal knowledge about the necessity of such a move and saw running for the board, and ultimately joining the school improvement process, as her best avenue to gaining such insight. Other participants viewed their participation on either a school improvement team or an advisory group as their points of access to learning about HF 2272. In all cases the knowledge about new mandated legislation filtered down from the superintendent. A previous superintendent was credited by many participants as having done a good job of

roll through different strands in the curriculum, send things to content experts, get them back, revise them, and we're there." This woman also identified her leadership hierarchy for mandate implementation. The superintendent was definitely the leader with her, the assessment director, and the elementary principal being about equal partners.

The assessment director had the exact same perspective with regards to leadership positions. She saw all members of the leadership team taking their own pieces of the mandate responsibility and ultimately reporting back to the superintendent so he could "single-handedly" put everything into the Annual Progress Report. She added, "The superintendent has a huge, huge ownership for this district." The elementary principal and curriculum director were viewed as equal partners with her, who functioned at the will of the superintendent to implement assessment mandates, meet administrative directives, or tackle curricular issues. She further cited the close relationship with all of the administrative team and acknowledged that because of the many and varied roles each of them played it was often difficult not to step on each other's toes. "We've had some hurt feelings. Sometimes you tend to step farther than you should have. But we've always come through it," she said.

The elementary principal saw his own role as being a facilitator for his elementary staff. Being a twenty-five year veteran of the district and knowing that his superintendent was from a secondary background, he understood his responsibility to be the visible leader to his teachers. He clearly enjoyed the team aspect and shared duties of the leadership team, but expressed a very personal kinship to his fellow teachers when he said, "They know I teach. They know I'm an administrator. They know I'm not going to throw them any curves." Several times he mentioned his wife who teaches in a neighboring district. He understood and empathized with the job demands of his staff.

including staff and the community in the school improvement process. Participants also reported the current superintendent as having maintained those efforts.

The intent of HF 2272 also resounded consistently with District B participants. An administrator responded, "It is my understanding it was intended to put into place a comprehensive school improvement process for the state of Iowa." He saw these mandates as a call for districts to develop, "a template for their improvement processes." A principal viewed the intent as an effort to push all districts into being more data-driven so that decision-making was based more on local research. Other participants spoke about an increased emphasis on student achievement, more accountability, and alignment of standards and curriculum. An elementary teacher offered, "I believe they. (the mandates), were intended to make sure every district is accountable to the state. Iowa in the past has just let the districts make their own decisions for what their communities need." She went on to suggest that the state might be reacting to federal legislation and saw some connection between what other states were doing and with what Iowa might be perceived as "not doing."

The data specialist for the district had a unique perspective on the intent as he served the district not as a full-time employee, but on a consultant basis. As a parent who had initially started out as a member of the school improvement team, he quickly learned that much of what the mandates were asking for were in fact areas of personal expertise. He reported going to early improvement meetings and thinking, "Oh, if I could just have an opportunity, there were some things we could do." Later that year, about 1999, the district received some grant money, advertised for, and hired the data specialist to organize district data for reporting to district stakeholders. This individual had been charged with assisting the administrative team with building what he called, "a guide to the accreditation of schools," for

District B. He stated, “The intent of HF 2272 is the legislature’s effort to insure consistency across school districts, to insure high educational standards and quality in schools, alignment of standards, assessment of curriculum, and reporting, which really all kind of go hand in hand.”

Intent versus Motives

Respondents were in agreement about the intent of HF 2272. The issue was accountability and the improvement of student achievement. Being held accountable to the district stakeholders was a piece of the legislation that this district saw as valuable. When discussing the motivation of the Iowa Legislature, participants were less confident in their elected official’s rationale for passing HF 2272. Many thoughts were offered about why the mandates were passed. Motives included declining rural enrollments, the cost of education and the intent of the legislature to insure “getting what they were paying for,” Iowa’s position of academic leadership both nationally and internationally, and a general belief that improvement needed to be a constant vigil. Other thoughts offered included the nature of the changing workplace and societal expectations for their children’s education. One respondent saw the mandates of HF 2272 as a way for legislators to force small school districts into forming regional high schools.

A board member went back to her reason for deciding to run for the board. She had been concerned about the quality of education, not just in her district, but also rural Iowa in general. Being a veteran board member allowed her personal insight to the challenges and strengths of a rural education for her children and all children of the district. She argued the school improvement efforts mandated by HF 2272 strengthened the bond between the school district and its stakeholders to the extent she believed few patrons viewed the mandates as a

threat to District B. She stated, "They see how we are doing, and they can see we are doing okay."

The guidance/assessment coordinator and an elementary teacher saw declining enrollments and the cost of rural education as the top motivation for legislative action to improve Iowa schools. The elementary participant argued that school improvement efforts become "living documents" in small districts, and "notebooks on a shelf" in larger districts. She added, "I guess my feeling is smaller is better. We have continuity. We nurture our children."

The guidance participant believed both declining enrollments and rural costs for education perhaps spearheaded legislative efforts to "complicate" matters for rural schools. She stated,

I'm concerned that people in urban areas don't understand rural education. I think eventually we as a state might have to come to the realization that it is just going to cost more to educate in the rural areas than it does in the urban. Because if we, [in this county] combine our two high schools, we will still be a small school with declining enrollment. Our school can do all of the great and wonderful things that we do, but if we don't have kids, it's not going to make a lot of difference.

Another participant was concerned that perhaps the mandates were an attempt to target Iowa's smallest districts, but was hopeful the motivation for such legislation was meant as a call for all districts to focus district efforts on student achievement, accountability, and communication with stakeholders. He concluded by offering, "You would hope this was meant for all schools. But yet we have conversations that we are just trying to jump through all the hoops. You just wonder how long the small schools can keep up with it."

A high school teacher had a belief that the legislative motivation focused on quality issues. He viewed the legislation as a response to both Iowa's place in national achievement rankings of states, and United States worldwide comparisons. He lamented the comparisons

based solely on standardized achievement testing arguing, “We still have the best educational system in the world regardless of what our test scores are.” He noted European friends whose children were often tracked very early, and often missed out on music, literature, arts, and sports. He did not view those opportunities as a well-rounded curriculum. This participant had no objection to the mandates and believed it realistic for legislators to expect quality regardless of district size. “Our students should come out of [this district] with a degree that means the same thing as a student coming out of any district in the state,” he said.

A principal perceived the motivation of legislators to be a mixture of many complex pieces. Quality was an issue. The negative publicity of falling test scores coupled with what he saw as educator apathy in telling the stories of the good things going on in Iowa schools added to the puzzle legislators were faced with. School districts dealt with taking on more and more responsibilities for student issues previously addressed by families and other institutions. This principal believed legislators wanted an accountability system giving taxpayers visible proof their local schools were using tax dollars wisely, offering a quality learning experience, and communicating their progress to the community on a regular basis. He added, “I think most of the legislation coming out is promoting the effort for regional schools. I think our Department of Education has basically told us that regional schools are the wave of the future. And while they don’t want to politically mandate it, the threat [to our district is] maybe not being here and being with a larger district or a conglomeration of other schools is very real.”

A final thought was presented by the superintendent when he said, “I really believe that education in the United States has got to change because of the changing reality of the workplace. What was sufficient in providing education to young people isn’t sufficient

anymore. I really think that's what the legislature is responding to." He had heard the concerns of other educators, some of his board members, and some faculty and parents about the intentions to close small schools. He did not believe this to be any part of the motivation of legislators. He saw schools as institutions that are often slow to make change and this was the legislative effort to promote needed change. He concluded with, "There are better ways to do things. I think that people have to come to understand that this whole process, this continuous improvement model where you look at where you are, you set goals, you implement the changes, and then you analyze, I think that's becoming part of the culture."

Impact of 2272

Other district participants voiced appreciation for the district's willingness to employ a data specialist and spoke with great pride of the APR which was produced by the data specialist. They viewed this partner as having the ability to take all of the "muddled pieces," and not only meet the intent of the mandates, but to put the data into an understandable format. After taking just a little over a year to determine the best way to meet the state requirements, participants had developed a system for putting assessment information into a computer and had the ability to develop charts that helped teachers at the local level. This same system provided the information that met state reporting requirements, and provided meaningful information to district patrons.

The impact of HF 2272 affected the district as a whole, as well as the individual participant roles. From a school board perspective, a board member described the increased workload for board members as they struggled to keep up with legislative mandates. She expressed even more concern for the "endless meetings" district administrators had to attend. "You know, it has been a lot of work, and their requirements are constantly changing," she stated.

The superintendent professed a major change in becoming a data-driven district. "Data-driven decision making has really become the way we do things here. The whole notion of the entire community, school staff, parents, and community members being involved in designing the school improvement process has all come about as a result of HF 2272." The participation of the community was also cited by several participants as a significant way in which their district had changed. Not only did they report information going from the school to the community, but also acknowledged a reciprocal partnership where community members felt comfortable to voice their concerns about school issues and the direction of the district. Again the previous superintendent was credited with having established a shared process that had not only included many stakeholders, but had also empowered that group as well.

A senior administrator described his personal role as having changed in several ways. He cited his participation on both the school improvement team as well as working with a largely parent-driven advisory board he had established. While not chairing either of these committees, he provided advisory or facilitation assistance as needed.

Some challenges were reported by the superintendent, but he believed the process put in place by the district as a result of HF 2272, and some earlier mandates such as 280.12/280.18, had allowed them to deal with issues as they surfaced. He viewed himself as being more an "agent of change" than he had experienced earlier in his career. He described conversations with staff where he talked about their need to understand that changes in education were inevitable and specifically stated, "Change is continuous. There is no solid ground where we can say we're done with that now, or we can expect something to be in place for a long period of time. It's always going to change." But this administrator

expressed a belief that staff trusted the school improvement model developed by the district and had the confidence needed to meet new challenges.

A principal echoed many of the same feelings. He pointed to town meetings, increased stakeholder involvement, and improved teacher awareness of improvement mandates as visible ways in which District B had changed. He used words such as “data-driven” and “ownership” as descriptors to illustrate his point.

A high school teacher described his observations of how the district was different after HF 2272, in terms of his students and his colleagues. He noted a change to block scheduling that he believed had caused students to be more engaged not just with their classes, but with their instructors as well. “We’ve got kids talking about what’s going on in the classroom,” he stated. He also professed a viewpoint that an increased awareness of workplace readiness was in evidence. He concluded by saying, “I think we have teachers and students thinking more in line of getting them out into the real world.”

An elementary teacher was very specific in how she and other teaching staff had been impacted by the new mandates. “I know where my vision is. I know where I want each and every one of my students. I know where the community expects our children to be. Whether a child is in first grade or a senior in high school, we all know the progression now.” She cited her focus on increased accountability for her students’ achievement as making her more aware of the little details in her teaching. She added, “I segment my lessons to make sure each piece of the puzzle is there. If we don’t get this, then we aren’t going to get the big picture. I try to make sure we’re not forgetting things.”

Both the assessment coordinator and the data specialist voiced similar beliefs about the changed emphasis of the district after HF 2272. The assessment coordinator specifically used

the word “focus” several times to describe her district’s change. Communication, understanding, and data-driven were words also used to illustrate the difference in how the district interacted with stakeholders.

The data specialist was able to offer very precise and personal insight to her beliefs about district change due to the legislated mandates of HF 2272. Prior to her employment with the school district, she had recollections of receiving a parent newsletter telling patrons about school information that was available if someone wanted to come to the superintendent’s office to see it. She had done just that, and remembered the superintendent not only having trouble finding the information, but also telling her that she was the only person who had paid him such a visit. She reported a marked improvement in how the district now handles similar information. A delegation of responsibility, initiated by a past superintendent, was seen by the data specialist as critical to the change reported in the district.

Being data-driven was also a common theme in the comments of the data specialist. She valued that data as a tool in engaging teachers and communicating with patrons about the progress of the district’s children. The data specialist reported a more recent account of information going home in this way, “People call me up after the APR has gone out. Wow! This is really nice. Are we going to be getting this every year? Patrons are starting to expect it.”

Other participants suggested that the district was now much more collaborative in nearly every school-wide effort. “It’s not just someone stuck in a room somewhere making a decision that no one can buy into. Everyone has a lot of ownership in the school improvement plan,” stated the curriculum director.

Leadership

All participants had some knowledge of the process used by the district to educate the staff and community about the mandates of HF 2272. But knowledge was clearly dependent on the time the participant had spent in the district. The data specialist, superintendent, and secondary principal were all relative newcomers to the district and their knowledge of the earliest efforts was based on what they had been told. The more complete picture of the effort came from a board member, two veteran teaching staff, and the curriculum/assessment participant. A board member felt the board provided the support the process needed. She felt that by exhibiting confidence in the teachers and administration, a clear message was sent to the community that the tasks of meeting state mandates and implementing school improvement initiatives were in good hands. She admitted having some hesitation through the early going stating, "It took a year or two. There were some bumps in the road early on with administration and staff. But it was through these problems that I realized we could work through this." She felt a part of the process and believed that parents were engaged as well. She acknowledged strong parental participation, though always hoping for even more. She concluded by saying, "I think parents are sitting back and saying they can rest assured knowing good things are going on here."

"Who are our leaders?" asked the elementary participant. She saw this as not a difficult question to answer, but one that caused her to reflect before offering her thoughts. Her perceptions included the superintendent serving as a facilitator with many other participants being important players. The role of the School Improvement Committee with its diverse membership was viewed as a strength by this participant. "Our superintendent just kind of makes sure it runs smoothly," she said.

The superintendent spoke at some length about his time in a previous district where he had served as an assistant superintendent. There he believed he experienced a style of leadership that had not been what he found to exist when he entered District B. This participant as well as many others willingly gave credit to the role played by the previous superintendent in allowing participatory leadership to emerge. The new superintendent had continued that style, allowing many to take responsibility in the school improvement process. That style was appreciated by all participants in this study. Superintendent B said, "I learned a lot from my previous situation. The superintendent needs to be the one who says the train is headed in this direction, and you guys need to be on the train. If the superintendent isn't saying that, it is very difficult for others to get on board and to move the whole staff forward." He viewed his own personal buy-in to the process as critical if his other leaders were to have the support and credibility to deal with implementation issues. His previous experience had led him to the belief that simply saying something had to be done for the sake of a requirement would not get true change to take place. Active participation at the very top of the school administration was viewed as the critical piece to this district's efforts.

The district data specialist also viewed the superintendent as an important leader in the mandate implementation process. She credited the former superintendent for his early implementation strategy, and her current district leader for his willingness to build upon what she viewed as a well-running process. She stated her position, the curriculum director, and the assessment director all played primary roles for the staff and community. She appreciated the shared responsibility and the respect shown each leadership participant. Also being a parent in the district, she believed this gave her added insights to the value of the information

being shared with all stakeholders, and saw what the district was doing as a “natural progression that all districts should be participating in.”

A secondary principal acknowledged the work of the district's two most recent superintendents and took very little personal credit. He saw himself providing support to the other district leaders charged with meeting state mandates in the areas of academic performance by taking on the leadership role in the areas that many feared would be lost due to the mandates. School climate, character education, and discipline issues were all reported as areas of emphasis for the secondary principal. He believed his willingness to take the responsibility in these student development areas allowed others to focus more of their time on meeting HF 2272. This principal stated, “Because of the work that had already been done, and the leadership that was in place, when I came here I put my energy into making this a safer more caring climate.” Other participants voiced appreciation for the role played by the secondary principal in what they viewed as his support of their efforts and the part he played in leading the district's efforts to meet expectations of community members in the areas of discipline and character education.

A long-time district employee, the guidance/assessment coordinator again provided some longitudinal perspective with her ability to go back to the very beginning of the district's improvement process. She continued to hold her previous superintendent in very high regard for his insights to effective leadership. “He did a really good job of providing leadership and then holding people accountable for their pieces of the effort. He was a good listener, and was willing to let the process develop into what it needed to be. But yet he was there to make sure that the process was moving forward,” she stated. She credited the former superintendent with using his building administrators initially, and then gradually broadening the scope of the

improvement team to include more people. The current school improvement model was eventually developed and was still in use at the time of this study. This participant concluded by saying, "Even though [the previous superintendent] is gone, it's still going on. **That's the** rather unique thing that's going on here. Even though we've had a change in a number of people, the process is still there and it will continue."

Prior Activity

Both the secondary principal and superintendent/elementary principal gave much of the district's implementation success to the previous superintendent. He was credited for having joined the district at the start of the process and leading the district through the implementation process. The superintendent viewed the hiring of his predecessor and the newly legislated HF 2272 as having meshed well for the district. He saw the mandates and the new leadership as dual catalysts in guiding improvement efforts. He described the previous superintendent as, "very supportive at the time HF 2272 was happening. He provided the district resources. A lot of the things I am enjoying as a superintendent as far as having pieces in place that need to be there were things that occurred while he was here."

A principal also praised both the previous superintendent and the current one as having led the district through the implementation process. Veteran teachers who had made their homes in the community and exhibited ownership for school improvements whether mandated or started at the local level were reported as valuable to the new mandate implementation process.

Implementation Facilitators

In addition he mentioned on-going assistance from the district's AEA partners. He acknowledged their contributions in the areas of grant writing assistance, data interpretation, and general guidance through many of the issues facing the district. He stated,

There was just no way we could have possibly gotten the time and resources to get this done. I definitely think we need to rely on our AEA partners more so than larger districts that have the layers of leadership already developed. We have to be straight up front and say who it is that needs help and where we need help, and then hopefully they can bring that help in. So yeah, I'd say the AEA is vital to a small Iowa district.

The superintendent echoed his principal's sentiments about the necessity of small district dependence on the AEA partnership. He mentioned both the local consultants and the school improvement consultants as critical pieces of the district improvement efforts. He saw the continuing, cooperative relationship with the district's AEA personnel as very importance if District B was to continue to improve.

Of significant importance to a principal was the trust he believed had been built with the community. Already fearing that the district would sooner or later fall into the School In Need Of Assistance category, he said that the groundwork has been done for the community to deal with that issue.

Teaching staff participants were somewhat divided in their perspective about whether or not HF 2272 had acted as a catalyst for improvement efforts, or if the district was already actively involved prior to the mandates. A high school teacher felt a lot of work had been done, but did not view the product as having real meaning to the practitioners in the district. He stated, "When the mandate was presented by administration, it became time to dust off that stuff we'd done and start applying it." He viewed the legislation as the "push" that moved the district forward.

An elementary teacher said, "The district's wheels were turning." She saw the previous work the district had done as a real head start, so that district administrators had little difficulty meeting with staff and asking them to simply continue the work the district had been involved with through earlier efforts. She described staff development efforts with shared

leadership and collegial interactions. She saw the district AEA consultants as valuable partners in the school improvement process.

Work with the New Iowa Schools project was cited by the assessment director as an asset to the district as they started down the HF 2272 path. She described both her own role as assessment coordinator, and the roles of several other individuals such as the data specialist and curriculum director as having really grown as the process had grown. The district's previous superintendent was again credited with the involvement with New Iowa Schools. Through this partnership and the networking with the Iowa Department of Education and the AEA, this participant believed the district was given "practical and usable advice." Specific assistance was mentioned coming from the AEA as the district worked to build their improvement plan. This participant believed that administration led the efforts in working with a school improvement team that brought teachers on board, and finally, after they had a workable model, engaged the community.

Implementation Barriers

Participants in District B were able to identify several barriers to their school improvement efforts. Very little time was spent complaining about money and time, but both were concerns that had been addressed. Clearly the most difficult barriers for this district to combat were workload of staff, the loss of several administrators, the frustration of many believing that school improvement was a "moving target, and the issue of change itself."

Nearly all participants had reached a comfort zone with the time issue as the district had chosen to double their in-service time a number of years ago. The board had listened to administration and staff explain what new requirements they would be faced with, and after receiving input from the community had agreed to two early dismissals each month for administration and teaching staff to receive necessary training and have the time to implement

the mandates of HF 2272. A board member reported that her group spent considerable time discussing the merits of doubling the early out days. She stated, "It was not a hard sell (to the community). We wanted to make sure that all teachers were spending that time doing what they were supposed to be doing. I feel like that has been done. I feel like all the teachers have been utilizing that time."

Both administration and staff spoke of the district's successes in being awarded grant monies that all reported were helpful in compensating staff for extra work. There was some fear expressed, however, that this might become a more difficult task for the district in the future.

Participants identified change and the frustration associated with an already heavy workload as being a challenge for all of them as they sought to implement what most thought were ever-changing mandates. The board member believed the biggest barrier to be not knowing what school improvement was supposed to look like. She stated, "We felt like we were doing pretty well and then all of a sudden we were expected to write this plan and implement it not knowing. I don't think they (the state) knew what they wanted. There was no model to follow." She believed the district had the structure in place to meet the mandates and was actively engaged in school improvement, but the ambiguity of the state's requests for compliance caused the district much consternation.

The secondary principal and superintendent/elementary principal both spoke to the work overload issue. "I'm superintendent and elementary principal. Plus I'm involved with school improvement and everything from buses to the lunchroom. But our teachers tend to be that way too." He noted the multiple preparations of the teaching staff, their committee work, extra-curricular assignments, and a variety of other things they were involved in. He

believed it very difficult for people to find the time to do everything they'd like to get done. The principal, who also served as the district athletic director, talked about the time he must put into hiring officials, scheduling athletic and fine arts dates, and simply the day to day running of a 7-12 building. He said, "You know, it's just tough for me to put the energy and time in for what I really got trained to do. I wish I had the time to impact student learning more and work with the teachers. You just run out of hours and time. You have great thoughts in the middle of the night, but it never gets put on paper. It really doesn't." This principal also recognized the challenge for teachers to balance all of their many course preparations, extra curricular assignments, school improvement involvement, and still have some semblance of a family life.

Teachers expressed appreciation for the time the district had set aside for staff development activities and the efforts to write grants that they saw as generally going to pay teachers for extra work. The most common concern of teaching staff was with their colleague's hesitancy to accept change. A high school teacher offered, "Our faculty has always been this way. When it's time for a change, we all grunt and groan a little bit. But we do it. And once we get started, everybody seems to come on board. And those that don't, they have to do it anyway." An elementary staff member believed that some people just don't accept change very well. She cited some staff members who had a difficult time looking down the road to retirement just two years away, and those teachers saying, "You aren't going to make me do any more." The general belief expressed by teaching participants was that administration and staff worked together very well in their efforts to implement the mandates of HF 2272. The district's data specialist also acknowledged minor resistance from a few teachers, but expressed, "By far the majority are really starting to believe it. Sometimes you

need to be a little thick-skinned and go with the majority.” She noted school board efforts to base decisions on data she saw as a product of the mandates. The data specialist cited a recent decision the board had made; to increase requirements for high school graduation, based on information generated in the district’s APR.

The superintendent, when discussing teacher resistance, offered insights that differentiated between an elementary mentality and a secondary mentality to change. He believed that especially in a small district, secondary teachers tend to be “more in silos,” where the language arts people and the science people don’t communicate very well. Elementary teachers teach all content areas and work closely together, including everything that goes into teaching, even the day-to-day operational tasks. He further stated, “I have thought a lot about this. I think there’s a difference between secondary and elementary staff members. I think they are just different creatures. Secondary staff can be harder to work with and harder to get to move. I just think it’s the nature of the beast.” He continued, “Elementary teachers and the nature of what they teach and how they teach tend to be more collaborative. That’s just the way it is in an elementary building. They have a tradition of working together.”

The superintendent built on his perspective of the teaching staff by describing his personal concern that some staff, especially secondary, may believe that legislated mandates and school improvement initiatives in general would “go away.” He voiced an opinion that many educators had seen mandates, new programming, or teaching techniques come and go during their careers, and feared that the most recent No Child Left Behind federally mandated legislation had just, “added fuel to that fire.” He was confident that the majority of his staff still had confidence in the district’s school improvement process, but believed that uncertainty

...ver what was really expected and a mistrust for what else might be coming
...state or federal level had slowed down the credibility of implementation.

...he guidance/assessment coordinator offered further insights into the difficulty
...managing change and maintaining credibility with the staff and community when juggling the
...many demands of HF 2272, and trying to ease teacher anxiety about what might be expected
...ext. As a long time district employee, she feared the loss of the previous superintendent and
...an elementary principal/curriculum director, whom she had replaced, might stall the
...improvement efforts of the district. To her thinking, this had not occurred. Rather, the
...current superintendent was credited with taking an established process and maintaining it
...well.

...She feared the process, but not the administration, had lost credibility with some staff
...and perhaps a very few in the community. She stated, "We had some things that hurt our
...efforts. We got the cart before the horse and had to go back to staff and you lose a lot of
...credibility." She concluded her thoughts with a wish that her own frustration, as well as the
...frustration of her colleagues be eased with more direction from policy makers.

Unintended Consequences

...Participants were mixed in their feelings about the impact of legislated mandates on
...other programs and school-wide efforts. Several felt they had experienced little change, while
...others cited both district-wide and personal concerns. On a personal level, one secondary
...participant expressed her fears that with the increased scrutiny of district math, reading, and
...science scores that some of the fine arts or vocational areas may not only lose funding, but
...also see student enrollments drop in those subject areas. When the district made the choice to
...increase math credits required for graduation this became a genuine concern for many of the
...non-academic area staff. She stated, "So far it seems to be working. Somehow they are still

getting the courses they want. Now whether or not we can continue to do that is another thing.”

The secondary principal worried about the time school improvement mandates would divert from teacher planning time and individual assistance for students. He believed his teachers were still sacrificing much of their own personal time to meet the needs of students, but saw difficulties on the horizon as they balanced the need to meet their own curricular responsibilities and still be meaningfully engaged with students. He concluded his comments by adding, “I do worry about it, but I don’t think it’s been a real negative. It’s been more of a positive over all growth. I think the positives outweigh the little negatives that might be occurring.”

The guidance/assessment coordinator also voiced concerns over the loss of instructional time. With all of the standardized assessments the district was already engaged in, she worried whether or not these multiple assessments might still be enough to meet the requirements of HF 2272. The district had already taken instructional time away and replaced it with assessments, and she feared more might be on the way. As a participant in the development of ICAM (Iowa Curriculum Assessment Modules) she wondered, “I understand why it was done, but I don’t know how many schools are really going to do it.”

She also mentioned character development programming and discipline issues as areas of concern not just for educators, but as values expressed by the community at town meetings that might go un-addressed or certainly not get the attention they had earlier warranted prior to the increased pressure to assess. She added, “I do get concerned that there’s going to be too much emphasis on the accountability and the achievement and the improvement initiatives

and some of those other areas are not going to get enough focus. And they are very important as well."

An elementary participant was undecided as to whether or not HF 2272 had diverted resources or energies away from other areas. Her concern was with the public seeing the big picture and not basing their opinion of the school on some isolated test score. She saw her colleagues as professionals who understood that test scores would sometimes go up, but also sometimes go down. She saw this as especially critical for stakeholders to understand in a district where one class might have less than twenty students and sub groups that might not number five. "One child makes a huge change in your score. And sometimes the newspaper doesn't give the whole picture," she stated.

The parent/data specialist for District B was adamant about HF 2272 not taking away from areas of student development when she stated, "No, I don't feel that way at all." Her feeling was that the increased accountability and the reporting mandates that followed were opportunities for school districts to build the trust with their constituents so that all stakeholders not only had a better understanding of district issues, but also had the comfort level to share with school decision-makers what their concerns were. She saw recently held town meetings as vehicles for parents to tell the school administration what might be missing from the curriculum and for district officials to hear first hand what parents and taxpayers expected from their school. "School District B has always practiced No Child Left Behind. Now that doesn't mean that every child will be proficient. No Child Left Behind is nobody falls through the cracks," according to this participant. Her fear was that regardless of the district's best efforts and their long time philosophy of NCLB, they might still be designated as a school that will.

Advice to Legislators

Participants in District B had five suggestions for legislators based on their personal experiences with implementation of HF 2272, and as legislators might look to alter or impose new mandates on educators in the future. The secondary principal thought funding new mandates was critical to their success. He acknowledged the slow economic climate, but believed that school districts already experiencing budget cuts did not need new unfunded mandates making already difficult times even more trying. His feeling was that school districts served children well with or without additional funding, but saw financial rewards as possible incentives for those individuals and districts doing exemplary work.

Several participants believed that legislators had minimal knowledge about what goes on in school buildings on a daily basis, and would ask that legislators become more knowledgeable about schools before implementing mandates for all school districts to follow. "Don't just read our scores. Come visit us," suggested an elementary participant. These

educators urged that before they are deemed too small or not of the quality that legislators and taxpayers expect, they not have a blanket placed over them and all other small Iowa schools and lumped into one category that is viewed by more-urban dwellers as inadequate.

A board member asked legislators to determine what it was they actually wanted before mandates were imposed. "Make things more clear. Figure out what you want before you tell us to scurry around and do what it is you think you want. We get halfway through something, and then they change it. It all changes and they want something different. It is very frustrating," she added.

Both the superintendent and the curriculum director believed that all of the changes might have been avoided had the legislature not seemingly rushed to impose the mandates and

had lengthened the implementation deadlines. There was a sense among several participants that the district had been a leader in school reform prior to mandates and had worked diligently to adapt to the new regulations. However, all of the starting and stopping and starting anew had caused district leaders personal frustration, but had also caused the process to lose credibility with staff and some patrons. The superintendent requested, "Give the Department of Education enough time to design the changes that need to be made. Give the schools enough time to implement the changes, to learn the skills they need to learn, and don't put the accountability piece through so quickly that we're pushed through the process and don't do it effectively."

A final suggestion to legislators came from a somewhat unlikely source. Both the assessment director and the data specialist, while acknowledging their liking for the numbers, did worry that the mandated reporting system did not take into account all that makes for a quality school experience for children. "There is so much more to a school. Being the data person, I love the numbers," but she also worried about the labeling aspect for schools, who because of their very small populations at some grade levels or identified groups, might find it difficult to have reliable data to report.

The data specialist summed up with this thought: "I think the theory is wonderful. I love the accountability piece and the reporting. I think the whole thing of no child falling through the cracks is very admirable. But there must be other ways of looking at the success of schools than the way the state wants to do it."

District C: The Community

District C was a small, consolidated district with both communities being located on a major U.S. highway in west central Iowa. A larger, county seat community with a number of

large employers was located several miles away and many patrons of District C work and seek entertainment in the neighboring community. The largest employers in District C would be the district itself and an agricultural enterprise. The district's children are housed in one K-12 building located in the larger of the two consolidated communities. In the past year a number of facility improvements had been undertaken including: roof replacement, window replacement, five stop elevator, gymnasium and locker room upgrades, and a new performing arts area.

The student population of District C was very homogeneous (nearly 100 % Caucasian). While the district tracked the progress of all students, only subgroup data for gender was reported in the Annual Progress Report. Because no other subgroups had sufficient numbers to require reporting to state or federal agencies, the district chose not to report other subgroups to the public in order to maintain confidentiality.

Nearly 55% of District C graduates had completed the "Core Curriculum" of four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies. Sixty-three percent of the students taking the American College Test (ACT) scored 20 or higher on the composite score. The District C average for all students taking the ACT was slightly below the national average and nearly two points below the state average. Ninety-five percent of the most recent graduating class intended to pursue post-secondary education/training.

The district participated in The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and The Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Proficiency scores in reading, math, and science compared favorably with state norms and exceeded national.

District C reported no dropouts in grades 7-12 for the past year. Activities and student involvement were heavily emphasized with 95% of all 7-12 students engaged in at least one

extra-curricular activity. The district benefited from strong community support. Parent volunteers, guest speakers, and business partners were actively involved in the school.

The district had a mix of younger and experienced viewpoints on the teaching staff. Many had strong roots in the community, and nearly half had been employed there for over 20 years.

District C: Finding

Legislative Intent

With the passage of HF 2272 in the spring of 1998, the process of communicating the specifics of the law began. Not only did participants begin to receive information about the new mandates, but they also heard messages about the intent of the legislation. Participants were split on the motivating factors that led legislators to enact HF 2272. Some believed it to be more of a quality issue and alluded to Iowa's long time standing as an educational leader among the states. While only one participant actually used the word "accountability," in describing what she viewed as the intent of the legislation, most voiced the opinion that the intent of HF 2272 was a call for Iowa school districts to "increase academic achievement and focus specifically on math, reading, and science scores." Teaching staff in particular described the intent in general terms. "I think the main intention was to make schools accountable so that what we say is happening at the school can be proven," stated one participant. Other teaching participants saw the mandates as a guide to school improvement or a blueprint for setting a direction, developing goals, and moving the district forward.

A school board member and members of the district administrative team were more specific in their perspectives about the intent of the mandates. "I think it was intended to improve the quality of education for our students, to increase student achievement, and to

encourage our teachers to look at student achievement more intently as they strive to increase it," stated a senior administrator. A principal saw the mandates as not only an effort to emphasize math, reading, and science scores on standardized tests, but also a call to align curricula throughout the state in an effort to compare achievement scores from district to district. This participant also professed a belief that HF 2272 was a peace offering to both the state and federal governments that Iowa schools were willing to give up some local control.

A senior staff person in the district acknowledged the importance of assessing student achievement and the desire to compare districts statewide, but also saw the reporting piece of the mandate as a critical component. A board member was quite global in her assessment of the intent of the mandate. She stated:

It was intended to improve our school system. We need to make sure we keep up with the times and not allow our walls to be crumbling down around us. When we look towards the future, we need to make sure we still have a school [in the district]. We need a competent staff to take care of the students and make sure they are getting what they need to go on to higher education . . . I think they just wanted us to be accountable. We need to show what is supposed to be happening is being done.

She was undecided whether or not HF 2272 could do those things for her district.

A principal had a somewhat similar view in thinking that HF 2272 was an attempt to provide Iowa school districts with a framework for change and school improvement. He saw mandates as a way to put "teeth" in the effort. He went on to suggest that legislators were seeking to insure Iowa's educational reputation and to offer some concessions to the state that while being accountable, local control for Iowa school districts was not lost.

Other respondents viewed it quite differently, however, in seeing 2272 as primarily an effort to make smaller schools adhere to regulations that might force them out of existence. Leading the closing of small schools theory was the district curriculum director. When asked why legislators chose to pass HF 2272, she replied, "I could give you my evil answer. They

want to get rid of small schools.” Her hope was that it was a quality issue, but she was very concerned that the legislative mentality was skewed against rural education. She recognized that there were good arguments on both sides of the large versus small issue, and was quick to point out the many advantages small districts had over their larger counterparts.

A similar sentiment was echoed by a secondary teacher: “I think they are trying to shut down little schools. They talk about quality. But quality is not dictated by the number of course offering a school has. Quality is determined by the people in the school.” This participant thought legislators were concerned that some school districts were not doing an adequate job of preparing students for college or the job market. She also viewed a lack of money as a factor.

A broad, more philosophical view of legislative intent was expressed by a senior staff person, suggesting that legislators had a multiple agenda. In an effort to insure Iowa’s continued status as a strong educational state, and to justify the large monetary expenditures, school districts needed to show they were doing what legislators and patrons of the local district expected them to be doing. If that meant the demise of some smaller districts, then so be it. “If we can’t meet the mandates, they are going to close us down. I think that is the fear of some people,” she said. This interviewee believed she was particularly sensitive to the small school issue because of her personal knowledge of student enrollment data for the district. “It’s right in front of my face. I see the kids leaving, the transcripts being sent out, and that’s a pretty concrete thing. I worry about it a lot. But I don’t know that the teachers in the classroom worry about it that much.”

Communication of the Policy

Learning about the new mandates for this district centered on the elementary principal/curriculum director for all participants who had not joined the district prior to the

legislation. Attending curriculum meetings and networking with colleagues was the curriculum director's first introduction to the mandates. "We could go and talk about what they meant to us and what we were going to have to do to get them implemented in our districts. These were the most meaningful conversations. They were hands-on, real life, so we could figure out what was meant and how we were going to do things," she said. The secondary principal, new to the district since the passage of the mandates, also reported first learning about the new requirements through the curriculum director in his previous district. He reported that little mention was made specifically of HF 2272. Rather, just as he had experienced in District C, his previous curriculum director spoke in terms of school improvement. In fact all participants were much more comfortable discussing improvement issues than in citing mandates or HF2272.

A school board member credited both the Iowa Association of School Boards newsletter and the district curriculum director for her introduction to HF2272. The curriculum director "brought the information to the board and we discussed it extensively," she stated. One teacher respondent remembered his first knowledge coming through course work in an administration program at a private college. He offered, "It was a major theme in a lot of my coursework." As an educator in a neighboring district to District C at the time of passage, this participant also credited that district's curriculum director as a key player in educating teaching staff about HF 2272.

Most other participants remembered their introduction to HF 2272 coming by way of staff meetings and committee work with the elementary principal/curriculum director. Leadership teams led by the curriculum director had been in operation for a number of years prior to the new mandates and several participants viewed their experience on those teams as

their port of entry to HF 2272. _____ is our curriculum director. She's fabulous. She is an absolute incredible asset to our district. She's kept us all up to speed on a lot of things for a very long time." offered one teacher.

Prior Activity

School improvement efforts prior to the passage of HF 2272 gave district participants a belief that they were "ahead of the game" when mandates were put in place for all Iowa schools. The transition from a less formal school improvement process to the more rigorous requirements of HF 2272, while certainly not going unnoticed failed to ignite great concern for the interviewees. Still, most participants were able to identify both a personal and district-wide impact as a result of the legislated mandates. Strength in the process of implementation shared by the board member was the community involvement even prior to the mandates. The previous superintendent was praised for very early on holding community meetings with many school personnel in attendance where dialogues about school issues were common place. "I think having the support of the superintendent and the principals in conjunction with the community helped to bring the teachers together," she concluded.

Teaching staff participants offered many thoughts about skills, resources, and what the district had looked like before, during, and after HF 2272 mandates we put in place. Most were in agreement that many of the skills necessary to evoke change were already in place. They spoke of good leadership and their own participation years before on leadership teams and study groups. Early on this district had engaged the community in long range planning. Some participants were able to remember back as far as the 1980's when it was not unusual for this district to hold a town meeting allowing patrons to gain knowledge and voice opinions about the school district.

When this staff was first introduced to HF 2272, most believed the skills and attitudes necessary to make changes were well in place. To facilitate implementation teaching participants reported being allowed and encouraged to attend workshops to increase their own personal comfort levels. All mentioned the twice a month late start for in-service time as a vital component of allowing teachers the time to not only learn, but implement change. All were thankful the school board and the community had shown little resistance to doubling the amount of in-service time prior to the legislated mandates.

Impact of 2272 on the District

The participants were able to clearly identify three stages their district had gone through after the passage of HF 2272. While many believed that skills and resources necessary for implementation were at least partially in existence prior to HF2272, there was a clear distinction between what the district looked like before, during, and after implementation.

A high school teacher offered a unique perspective in that he had started the school improvement process at a larger neighboring district and had seen the efforts as meaningless. Believing the school improvement effort would be similar in District C, he was reluctant to engage himself actively in the process. When asked by the curriculum director to revise his standards and benchmarks to "put his own stamp on his classes," he did not take the request seriously. "I kind of ignored her figuring they were not very important. And she bugged me, and bugged me, and bugged me, and bugged me. She constantly talked about standards and benchmarks and how they should be on your desk. By the end of the year I found myself going back and re-writing them. Now I use them every day," he said. What this participant had viewed as a futile, meaningless effort in his previous school had changed his way of doing

business dramatically as a District C educator. So while not able to fully understand how the district might have changed since the passage of HF 2272, this participant saw significant personal change.

Another aspect that impacted this participant's view came from being a graduate of the very high school in which he now taught. He'd not thought much about going into school administration until returning to teach in his former school. He viewed the mandates and the way in which this district proceeded with their implementation as a wake-up call for him personally and many of his colleagues who had taught him as a student. "Sometimes as a professional, especially as a teacher, I don't think we are well respected as being accountable for doing a good job. I know education is better now. I'm in the same dang building I went through, and I know the teachers and the education they are providing is better than it was when I went through here," he said.

A board member described changes in the district in terms of her role as a board member and also as a parent. Both an awareness and appreciation were expressed for the increased information brought to board meetings by both administrators and teaching staff. She described both the administrative team and the teaching staff as taking more responsibility for student learning. She mentioned the respect educators deserve for the vital role they play in student development. Her board involvement had given her an insider's look at the decisions made and processes used to make those decisions by educators. On a personal note, this board member acknowledged the insight she had acquired about the educational needs of her own child and the improved understanding she now had of teacher efforts to not only meet the needs of her child, but all children.

Both of the principals identified increased knowledge of what was actually being taught in the classrooms as a change in their role as building administrators. The secondary principal believed his formal evaluation procedure and staff development efforts all had changed because of HF 2272. "I'm not such a manager anymore. I'm definitely taking more of a leadership role in guiding our staff down the road to school improvement," he stated.

A long time district employee reported the biggest change for the district was now setting school-wide goals rather than looking at content area goals as they had in the past. In a district that she reported as having used parent committees for a long time, she again saw another change in now reporting the progress in accomplishing district goals through the Annual Progress Report.

Besides increased awareness of classroom activities, this principal/curriculum director liked the chance to now work more closely with groups of teachers both across the curriculum and vertically by grade levels. "I now work with the whole K-12 staff. It may have happened at some point anyway. But I know for a fact it was a result of this (HF 2272) that I now do," she said.

One teaching participant was especially proud of a way in which she perceived the district had changed since HF 2272. While still making good use of the late-start, in-service opportunities, this had simply become not enough for some staff. Elementary Teacher C reported, "Study groups have become important to many of us. If you want to be in a study group after school, we have a number of staff who give up time to do that. It's important to us to make this a better place here."

Leadership

This district was unique in that it was the only district where the current superintendent was not interviewed. The previous superintendent had recently retired after thirty-five years in the district. The superintendent therefore chose not to be interviewed, as he believed there were many more knowledgeable participants who could assist **with this** study. The current superintendent, a long time educator himself, had taken several years to work in private business and was just now re-entering the education field.

A member of the school board believed the district's greatest resource was the leadership of the previous superintendent as well as the expertise of the current curriculum director in guiding the staff through the requirements of the mandates. "I know at first there were some grumbles, but [the curriculum director] did a tremendous job of making sure everyone felt comfortable. She is not afraid to work. She is not afraid to put in the hours. I think most accepted it quite well," she said.

This board member's perception aligned with virtually all interviewees in agreeing that the curriculum director led the school improvement efforts for the district. The previous superintendent, having served the district in that capacity for 35 years, had entrusted this person with the task of implementing the mandates. The curriculum director had convinced her superintendent that attendance at curriculum meetings should not be determined by the meeting agenda, **but rather as an opportunity for her to network with other educators and** problem solve issues that the district would be faced with. Her style was to share information she was receiving through her curriculum consortium group with the **other** district administrators. Ideas were taken from other districts and decisions were made **about what felt** "comfortable" for District C. "We just trusted each other. There was no sense that they are

out to get me or this is just some more busy work. I think people just trusted that the school improvement committee was taking a look at the big picture and trying to determine what was best for our kids," stated the curriculum director.

A principal was able to look broadly at the role of curriculum director in comparison to a district where he had previously worked. As a recent addition to the administrative team, (in his third year,) he believed the knowledge and communication skills of the curriculum director had been of great assistance to him personally and to the teaching staff. He viewed her teaching position in the district prior to becoming an administrator and the respect shown her by other administrators as big boosts to her credibility with teaching staff. She also felt that bond expressing, "I definitely agree that being a teacher here brings some credibility with it. They know I wouldn't make them do anything I wouldn't want to do myself. I wasn't just telling them what they had to get done. I was doing it at the same time they were doing it."

All respondents were in agreement that her perception in this regard was accurate. Starting as a secondary teacher in the district, she had continued her education in the area of curriculum and administration. When a half-time curriculum director who was shared with another district resigned, she was hired to take over curriculum. Eventually she was also hired as the elementary principal. Participants were unanimous in their praise of, and respect for the job she was doing. Several believed the leadership style of the long time previous superintendent was directly responsible for the control over school improvement that the curriculum director wielded. Speaking of the retired superintendent, a senior staff person said, "He was more of an old school superintendent. He was working on the building and grounds and more the financial, business part of school. Educational stuff, he funneled down to her. A high school teacher added, "When those things (HF 2272) came along, he really

didn't take control himself. He allowed someone with good skills to go ahead and lead. I supposed that is good leadership."

When looking at her own role as a member of the district leadership team, the curriculum director was quick to give credit to many partners. She mentioned the confidence shown in her by the previous superintendent as well as the support of all current administrators. She reported their attendance and participation in all in-service efforts and saw that as a critical component of modeling for the teaching staff. The leadership shown by teachers was also greatly valued. She said, "We are a small district and it is hard to hide in the corners. Success breeds success. We try to recognize teachers who are doing good things by using them as examples at in-services. We are not big enough to have lead teachers. Here we are all lead teachers."

Her opportunities to attend meetings and be trusted to lead the local district implementation efforts were a source of pride for this participant. When it became time to submit the APR, she knew it was her job. The CSIP would be her responsibility as well. She understood this, as did everyone else. Being up to the task was never a question in anyone's mind. She had their complete confidence.

A principal was thankful for the opportunity to learn from his administrator partners and described his leadership responsibilities in much the same way others had reported. "Your staff is going to model your beliefs," he stated. He tried to partner with his teachers in their implementation efforts. He believed keeping lines of communication open and not "springing things on the teachers" were skills he was continuing to learn from the elementary principal and his current superintendent. A final thought for this administrator centered on understanding that he was learning along with his staff. "I've learned just as much if not more

than our teaching staff in the past three years. Nobody prepared me for this in college," he

The teaching staff was supportive of the district leadership style. They respected and supported their HF 2272 leader, and appreciated her understanding of what was expected of them. A high school teacher participant stated, "The high school principal and the superintendent definitely support the effort. But she, (curriculum director) is the leader. We are all allowed to be leaders in our departments, and when you're allowed to do that, you internalize it yourself. You decide it's important to work on." This participant and at least one other mentioned that periodic prodding needed to occur, although it was never done in a threatening manner. "Sometimes she kind of needs to nag us. But we have come to appreciate it because we can see she is leading us down the right path," she said.

A final perspective on district leadership was offered by a former student and current teacher. While acknowledging the obvious district improvement leader, he also saw wisdom in the previous superintendent who identified the right person to lead the district's implementation process and then gave her the resources of time and money and trusted the task would be done. This participant also saw other administrators in supportive roles, but believed that the district was unique in that it is not like most other small Iowa towns. "We're turning into a bedroom community. People here do pretty well economically. Things are good here because we live off of _____. A lot of small towns in Iowa, things aren't so good. So we have a community that perhaps has higher expectations, and pushes for the very best education for their children," he said. Having a supportive school board was also seen as an important aspect of leadership by this participant.

In summarizing, a principal cited administrative leadership at all levels as being crucial to the efforts of bringing teachers and other stakeholders on board. This principal believed the district had been able to provide the resources the staff needed to not only be comfortable with implementation, but to accomplish it successfully.

Community

An elementary participant could not see a big difference in the district other than the emphasis on community involvement. "We get more parents in here to help us. We report to them and we're just all more involved with parents," she said. On a personal note this participant believed that she had benefited as an educator by becoming more aware of what was going on in curricular areas other than her own. She cited her own increased knowledge of district adopted standards and benchmarks and the articulation between grade levels as having made her a better and more valuable teacher for the district. She was appreciative of the structure the mandates had forced the district to adopt.

The major change at the district level had been the reporting mechanisms that had been put in place for both parents and other stakeholders, according to one elementary teacher. This interviewee did not think much had changed in her day-to-day teaching life, but did report an increased awareness of the total school year. "I think about things I need to have done by certain times of the year because I know standardized tests are given at certain times. So as a whole I think about things a little differently. There is now more pressure on teachers and students to perform," she said. This teacher also talked about her lunch time conversations with colleagues and the increased pressure they all felt with the increased emphasis on standardized testing and how poor performance could impact the district.

Role of the AEA

Several interviewees praised the efforts of AEA personnel who they saw as generally working with the curriculum director who filtered the information back to them, but still knew that AEA consultants were available to individual teachers if they needed assistance. A principal was especially vocal in praising the contribution of the AEA team and several consultants in particular. "They have tremendous expertise. If they don't have an answer, they are willing to go out and locate the information and get right back to you. I think that is where the AEA has done a wonderful job for us," he concluded.

Intended and Unintended Consequences

Within the district there was not a consensus voiced about the impact of HF 2272 on other initiatives and programs. A school board member was not of the opinion that anything else had suffered. "I don't think so," she said. Continuing, "To me they are spotlighting the three most important areas in finding if my children are prepared to go on after high school. You need to have well-rounded students who have exposure to the arts and sports, but to keep math, reading, and science as the top priorities, that's as it should be."

The elementary principal/curriculum director held a similar opinion when asked about HF 2272 diverting energies away from other efforts. "No. I don't think so. I don't think it has diverted us. It's probably helped us sharpen our focus," she said. In reviewing all of the district's previous efforts she saw the mandates as a guide to directing the multiple efforts that schools found themselves engaged in.

On the other hand, others in the district agreed with a principal who talked about the focusing power of the mandates, but worried about the message the emphasis on just three curricular areas sent to other teaching staff and the general public. He hoped that if anything

had been de-emphasized it had come about as a result of careful examination and a thoughtful decision-making process. "We've tried to take the point of view that we don't just teach social studies, or we don't just teach math. There is a cumulative effect. We want our curriculum to connect, to over-lap. Obviously social studies is going to teach reading skills and other subjects will do the same thing. We try to take that edge away that some people may feel their subject matter is being slighted by using that philosophy," he said.

A secondary art teacher participant offered, "I don't feel like my program got pushed to the back burner because I am still writing standards and benchmarks like everyone else." But she did express her belief that with no standardized measurement of her program being mandated that she should, and did accept the fact that when money is scarce any extra for materials or equipment was not likely to come her way. "Maybe I'm too practical. I know that money has to go to other places," she said.

In a little different vein, another non-core teacher hesitated to acknowledge that anything might have been abandoned because of HF 2272 legislation, but his discomfort revolved around the mandated emphasis on standardized testing. Being a former athlete and coach, this participant had trouble understanding the district philosophy, and what he believed to be the forced philosophy of other districts, that goals should be set low enough so that achievement was very nearly a foregone conclusion. In his mind goal setting should be about setting goals high and working hard to come as close to reaching that goal as possible. He also worried about the message the increasing time spent on standardized testing sent to his students. He believed it discouraged some, and was a waste of valuable learning time for most.

An elementary math teacher continued with the standardized test theme and believed that too much testing, and the power given those test results was harmful. While some participants praised HF 2272 for sharpening the district focus, this participant argued that it **periodically** caused her to lose focus with her math students. She gave an example by saying,

It would be fair to say that I divert my attention away from our regular standards and benchmarks so my students will do well on the ICAM test. When it comes time to take those tests we start doing a lot of work on patterning because otherwise I don't think the kids will do very well on the test. Geometry is not one of my benchmarks, but that's the test we give, and when it comes time before the test, we start doing a lot of work.

Standardized testing was the concern of another teacher because she saw her colleagues being frustrated with the time consumed by the tests. It was her view that

We were asked to do it in a very nice way. We complied. However there were still some grumblings because we felt it was cutting into our time for teaching the kids what we feel they need to know. Somebody was telling us what to do, and we don't want or need to be told constantly what to do when. We know what the students need.

A senior staff person identified gifted education as an area she feared had lost some steam. She worried that physical education and some of the vocational areas might feel devalued. She concluded her thoughts with, "This is supposed to bring everyone in. We've talked about that as groups. Does it leave others out? Some perhaps do feel left out."

Participants were not sure legislators were receiving the results desired when HF 2272 was first passed. "I hope they are. We've studied our data here for a long time, so I hope they're taking the time to study what they are receiving," said an elementary teacher. The elementary/ curriculum participant stated, "It's (HF 2272) not a magic pill. It's a mandate, a piece of legislation. It takes people and it takes time to do what they want us to do. There are

a lot of expectations on schools. You have to look at the whole child. You can't just focus on

A high school teacher mused that perhaps those districts that had strong leadership teams were more likely to have success in providing the information the state was hoping to receive. "Unless you have someone who has the skills and the desire to take you through the process, most educators aren't going to do this. It's too easy to keep doing what you've always done," he said. A principal thought perhaps the state was not getting what they had hoped for because of the unanticipated economic downturn in the state and national economies. "They did not anticipate how much this would cost and how long it might take. While the intention is good, this may not have been thought through as it could have been," he stated.

The guidance/assessment participant was most critical of the value legislators might be getting from the mandated reporting. She complained, "It's a farce! They are getting a report back. You can make data look whatever way you want it to look. Those people down there in [Des Moines] think they are getting what they want. They don't understand our district, and they don't understand our students. It's just a numbers game." She did however value the school improvement process at the local level and believed it to have given the local practitioners a focus for their own efforts.

A senior administrator was cautious, for while valuing the improvement process and acknowledging the strength of HF 2272 -- "I think it injected us," -- to facilitate district-wide change, it was not without a downside. "As valuable as this has been, I do think we have cut into some other things we were doing and some things that are very important may now not be getting as much attention as they should be."

Barriers

Participants reported overall satisfaction with the implementation processes that had been put in place to meet the requirements of HF 2272. Yet all were able to identify several barriers that made, or continued to make the change process somewhat difficult. Barriers fell into four main categories: time, unrealistic expectations, declining enrollment and budgetary issues, and issues relating to teaching staff.

A lack of time was the most easily identifiable barrier named by district participants. Some mentioned it almost casually. "Probably if anything it would be the time element," stated one participant. For others it was a large obstacle to overcome. An elementary math teacher appreciated the late start in-service time adopted by the district and the opportunities provided during the summer to do curriculum work. But he stated, "A lot of this just has to come on your own to get finished. I don't think there is any way you can do these things in the scope of a work day." A high school teacher participant linked a lack of time with the multiple assignments small schoolteachers are faced with. "I teach math. I teach history. Some people are working in three different areas. When you're caught in this process for three different departments I think it gets really difficult," he said. Another high school participant acknowledged, "A lot of people are going to tell you time is a barrier. But I think you create your own time. I don't gripe about it anymore. Did they give me adequate time and preparation to prepare me for what I was expected to do? Yes. Even with the dwindling amounts of Phase III dollars, I think we were given adequate time and

A principal identified another time issue as the time taken to bring new staff on board each school year. He believed the district's teacher turnover rate to be higher than many

larger school districts. As more and more staff retired or left to seek employment elsewhere, he feared his district was doing an excessive amount of re-teaching to newcomers.

A senior administrative official believed that most staff possessed the skills necessary to implement HF 2272, but cited both time and money as resources that had been difficult to keep up with. She believed that teacher morale had stayed high, but did wish that teachers could have been compensated monetarily for more of their efforts.

A member of the school board shared similar concerns, but expanded those to include declining enrollment in the district as well as the difficulty in attracting and retaining quality teachers to a small community with limited financial or aesthetic resources. She said, "I worry about getting people to come here. Math and science people are especially difficult for us to attract and then keep. A lot of younger teachers are looking for jobs in a bigger town where they can make more money and have things to do after five o'clock." A principal added, "The hiring process for small schools is very difficult. Our candidate pools can be very small. Our former superintendent used to say sometimes you just need a body. Then you hope that through your mentoring program and a lot of administrative support you can bring people along." He went on to describe the difficult situations faced recently in losing several talented, respected educators to retirement and the issues the district was facing in either replacing them or in trying to assist their current replacements.

The declining enrollment issue impacted the district in several ways with the most obvious being lower funding. Several participants worried aloud about the impact of losing the budget guarantee in the near future. Others saw their low numbers as an impediment to having truly meaningful scores to report when one or two needy move-ins or the wrong two children moving out of a grade level could greatly impact a reported standardized score.

Both the guidance/assessment coordinator and the elementary principal/curriculum director offered examples of barriers that differed greatly from other participants. Teacher hesitancy to change was viewed as a possible barrier by the guidance counselor. She gave as **example** some staff who upon nearing retirement were reluctant to dig in and make significant **changes**. She showed understanding of that view as she guessed many of these staff had **probably** seen “the flavor of the week” come and go many times in their teaching careers. Another barrier put forth by this participant was her belief that staff may have had more buy-in to the process if so much of the research work had not been provided for them. The impending deadlines for implementation in her mind had made this an impossibility.

One senior administrator listed three barriers that she felt had and continued to impede the district’s school improvement process. Too much focus on district-wide assessments was seen as the first threat to meaningful student achievement improvement. She stated, “District-wide assessments have their place. They can help direct curriculum and pick out groups of students who may need more help. But as far as actually helping kids, your classroom assessments, your day-to-day observations are going to be much more meaningful.”

The second barrier identified was the ever-growing workload on all educators, but especially teachers. “Teachers are valued less, and less, and less. They are being asked to do more, and more, and more,” she commented. For this educator the mandates of HF 2272 brought front and center the importance of the work that teachers do, and strengthened her belief that few show genuine understanding of the difficult task of educating children.

A final barrier offered by the elementary principal/curriculum director was one of unrealistic expectations. She stated, “I understand wanting every child to be proficient, but in the real world I don’t think every child is going to be proficient. No matter how **much one-**

on-one help we give, no matter how many times we test a child, some are not going to be proficient." And she believed her teachers understood this too.

Advice to Legislators

The number one request of participants would be to not only have a voice in any new mandates that might be imposed at a later date, but for law makers to come and visit school sites before initiating new requirements for schools. "I don't think educators buy into stuff that gets mandated top down unless they have a voice in deciding, offered one teacher participant. This educator believed that much of the district's implementation success had come about because local administration had done a good job of not mandating in a top down fashion. He hoped legislators might learn from some of the more successful local models of policy implementation.

Several other participants wished for more local teacher input and increased opportunities for lawmakers to gain personal knowledge about school districts. More money and more time to implement were also repeated requests for many. "I think they have to understand some of these things require funding, require time. They have to think teachers are worth a little more than they think we are," lamented one teacher.

A principal was concerned that the legislature had sketchy plans at best for what the next steps might be with regards to truly holding districts accountable. He said, "I'm not sure the state legislature knows what the next step is. Anytime you create a gray area, people make up their own meanings. They fill in the blanks. You have five hundred different agendas out there all speaking to certain groups of people and that can create a lot of false understanding." This participant asked that politicians drop partisan positions and act as elected officials of the people of Iowa.

Three educators were most passionate in their requests to legislators. While they still hoped for more voice and a chance for decision-makers to visit school sites, they expressed great concern for the increasing poverty levels of students and the poor early- childhood experiences for many of the state's children. Their fears were that too much emphasis on academic performance, and standardized testing in particular, was going to hamper what they viewed as already not nearly enough funding for student needs in the areas of social, emotional, and behavioral spheres. One elementary participant described some of her students as, "coming to school with so much extra baggage. We expect them to walk through that door and be focused and ready to roll on academics, and that's not true. They live in a different world not knowing where they're going this weekend or what parent will they be with tonight." This educator would rather the legislature allow schools more freedom in determining the needs of children than to continue to pass broad legislation that may have deeply disturbing and unintended consequences for a large number of Iowa's children.

Across-District Themes

Prior Activity

Districts used in this research study were convinced that their early, self-initiated efforts in implementing school improvement had served them well in the implementation of HF 2272. Each expressed pride in "being ahead of the game." For many, the basic ideas embedded in the new requirements of HF 2272 were not foreign, but more an extension of what the district had been doing for years.

Interviewees saw the mandates as more work, but conceptually it was, according to one teacher, "the same old stuff" re-packaged. The prior school improvement efforts in each of these "active" districts came from leaders who were well versed in change strategies and

research on what it took to engender better schools. A key **assumption** of this approach to school improvement is that performance information will drive change because the **rewards** and sanctions embedded within it will motivate **teachers and schools to improve** (Massell, 1998). From administrative leaders to teacher-led study teams, and from writing standards and benchmarks to leading community involvement, each district had, over time, woven together its own plan for improvement long before the advent of 2272. This history is an incredibly important piece of the implementation puzzle, according to Elmore (2002) who argues that the best predictor of how a school will respond to state policy is its organizational culture when the policy becomes effective.

Leadership

Just as in the past, leaders at every level in the district proved to be critical to improving schools under the new state policy. As had been the case prior to 2272, in each of the three districts studied, superintendents and curriculum directors assumed primary responsibility for the implementation process. As the first line of information gathering, these key educators played a number of roles, including support and encouragement for other members of the administrative team and teachers, grant writing, and procurement of outside resources such as AEA staff or specialty area consultants. Firestone (2001) suggests, "that when the key decision makers in a district have a propensity to act in a certain direction and see the policy as contributing to their own goals, they will implement it aggressively" (p. 134). Administrators **repeatedly saw the state policy as a way of doing what they had wanted to do anyway**. Meanwhile, principals acted as ballast to steady the boat in maintaining predictability in school routines and **learning even while so much around them was changing**.

trying to achieve stability and change simultaneously in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Superintendents. “Rosenblum and Louis found that superintendent support was a key predictor of successful implementation” (Fairman & Firestone, 2001, p.134). Current as well as former superintendents were credited with guiding the districts with an eye to the future and an ability to skillfully maneuver the district through change. Two of the three districts in this study had recently changed superintendents and both the current office holder and other participants were extremely generous in their praise of the vision and leadership styles of the former administrator. As one of the current superintendents made clear, “A lot of the things we enjoy today are a direct result of things that occurred while she (previous superintendent) is here.” Another of the new superintendents added, “Even though he’s (previous superintendent) gone, the process is still going on. Even though there’s been a change in a number of people, the process is set and will continue.” As Ellis (2000) makes the point about the context of the founding of our government, we need to understand that “inherited circumstances define the parameters within which . . . leadership takes place” (p. 185).

The superintendents interviewed for this study viewed their roles in several ways. First and foremost, all talked about the importance of being “pro-active” in the school improvement process. They viewed their role as the educational leader who had to make sure that key players in the district got on board. In this view, the superintendent was the person who must say “the train is headed in this direction, and you all need to be on that train.” Each superintendent used transformational leadership skills to liberate capacities of organizational membership (Conger & Kanungo, 1988b), to increase commitment to organizational goals (Leithwood et al, 1993a), and to stimulate increased effort on behalf of the organization’s

mission (Bass & Avolio, 1994). There was a virtually unanimous sentiment that without the superintendent-leader it would be very difficult to “move the staff forward.” Other district administrators expressed the centrality of leadership as the importance of his or her “weight” in moving the district. One principal appreciated the superintendent as the person who “holds people accountable for their pieces of the effort.” A curriculum director valued a superintendent who understood the balance between being, on the one hand, a “good listener” and “willing to let the process develop” and on the other hand, also always there to “make sure the process was moving forward.”

Other roles of the superintendent were often done in partnership with the curriculum director. Together they gleaned information from various sources, they served in the role of interpreter of state policy and procedures for the district, and they chose how and when to communicate what they had learned to other district practitioners. This was particularly necessary in small districts where curriculum people were also depended upon to either teach or administer. Attendance at informational meetings was a shared duty, often dependent on who could spare the time. But it was through these meetings that all districts reported attaining the information or learning what other districts were doing.

Once back in the home district, it was again the role of the superintendent and curriculum director to interpret and make sense of the ever-changing procedural guidelines from the state and to develop, or re-develop, a plan to make the new procedures feasible and effective given other district initiatives. Finally, it was the role of the superintendent or curriculum director to direct the efforts at financing the implementation, either through grant writing or the allocation of resources such as time and money.

In each of the three districts the curriculum director shared important responsibilities with the superintendent, but each curriculum director had his or her own distinctive role as the implementation advocate. Bass et al. (1987), suggest that transformational leadership might look "different" dependent upon the adopted style of the leader. This was especially true for teaching staff in that the curriculum director was generally viewed as "one of the staff" and felt that way themselves. Each had come up through the teaching ranks within their district and had gained credibility as a teacher first.

Principals. Building principals were counted on to maintain the day-to-day operations of the school as well as support the implementation process. They were viewed as the instructional leaders of their buildings even in light of the fact that they often had less to do directly with the actual implementation process than did top administrators and teachers. Utilizing shared leadership, wherein administrators regardless of their formal leadership roles use multiple strategies to alter school culture in improvement efforts (Brown, 1993), it was the principal who had to keep in perspective the over-all workload of teachers, as particularly in these small districts, most teachers already had multiple responsibilities. Aside from trying to help balance on-going as well as new assignments for teachers, principals had their usual multiple roles in "keeping school." They functioned as building disciplinarian, athletic director, and even athletic coach, the sorts of responsibilities, which were commonly associated by communities as essential aspects of a good school. In addition, principals were important symbolic leaders, supporting school improvement efforts through attending and participating in a variety of activities generally viewed as essential to move a school beyond simple compliance with the state law.

Teachers. Teacher-leaders were critical in the grassroots implementation efforts and in modeling and encouraging colleagues. Teachers led much of the ground level implementation charge. Many felt a sense of empowerment and ownership as they had been invited to serve on some of each district's earliest ventures into school improvement.

"Success breeds success," stated a curriculum director. She continued, "We try to recognize teachers who are doing good things and use them as examples for others to follow. We're not big enough to have lead teachers. Here we are all lead teachers." The natural associations in small schools seem to support McLaughlin's (1998) contention that "the relationships among teachers and the organizational conditions that support discourse and strong community" are essential to making reform work. Teachers in these schools, in McLaughlin's words, had the "opportunity to talk together, understand each others' practice, and move as a community to visions of practice" (p. 81).

Under girding the discourse in small districts was the reality that "it is difficult to hide." As an elementary teacher put it, "I wouldn't call it peer pressure. But if everybody else is on board with an idea, we do try to encourage others to come on board with us." Staff felt a responsibility to the district and to each other to not only model appropriate behaviors, but to encourage colleagues to try new things. This context created an upward spiral that, as McLaughlin (1987) suggested, motivated individuals generally make efforts to do their jobs well (p. 174).

The districts were proud that they had been chosen as part of this study. They saw this as validation for not only their current efforts, but also the work that had been done previously. Several wondered aloud about "other schools" who they viewed as not truly

working at school improvement, but rather going through the motions and literally “using other people’s stuff” to just get by.

While increased accountability was generally viewed favorably, districts were left to wonder, however, why all districts were being dealt with in the same way when not all districts were in the same development stages of improvement. HF 2272 was viewed by many as just more hoops to jump through whether it be directed at those districts who had shown good jumping ability or those who had not. A real sense of “what’s next” was prevalent as districts concerned themselves with what policymakers might look to mandate next.

Communit

Small towns are all about their schools. That sentiment was heard repeatedly from participants in this study. If the belief that HF 2272 was that public reporting would make community stakeholders uncomfortable or unhappy with the local schools and thus pressure them to do better (Debray et al. 2001), it did not occur in the three districts studied. Most believed their communities held the school district in very high regard and that a feeling of trust had been built and maintained. One superintendent described his community in this way, “We (educators) have to hold ourselves to the highest scrutiny, because [if we won’t the community] won’t. They trust that we are doing a good job. We are in a community that appreciates and trusts us completely.” A secondary aspect of this close relationship with the school was an understanding of the perceived perils that small districts face, and perhaps a tolerance for allowing the local district to be given some latitude in academic areas because of the great value placed on the non-mandated programming they believed their small schools

provided. "I think parents are sitting back and thinking they can rest assured knowing good things are going on here," offered a secondary teacher.

The mandates of HF 2272 warranted little concern from small districts that had a long history of engaging their patrons not only in district planning efforts and informational meetings, but were very comfortable in serving as the gathering place for various community activities that had nothing to do with school. There was a real sense that the community had known for a long time not only what was going on with the school, but because of the very intimate setting, often what was going on with individual students. An elementary teacher summed up her feelings in this way, "We are like a family. If something is going on with a child, it affects all of us." It was a clear belief that the public wanted and deserved to know how efforts to change the school would effect the teaching, learning, and well-being of the district's children (Cohen & Hill, 2001). The small school districts and the communities that support them talk about "their" children and seemed to know intuitively how organizations, and maybe especially small schools, could be best conceived as "social organisms." Scott (1998) speaks of larger jurisdictions but makes the point that in such organizations, "interconnections are so complex and dimly understood that planning always risks unknowingly cutting into its living tissue" (p. 139).

Barriers

The failure to recognize hidden constraints during the planning stage, only to have them discovered well into the implementation phase (Majone & Wildavsky, 1977) troubled interviewees. Several participants mentioned the perceived "starts and stops" throughout the policy implementation process, but clearly the most formidable barriers identified were time, money, the change process, and teacher turnover.

Time. The time issue took on several dimensions for practitioners as they worked to implement state mandates. With staff development time at a premium, each of these districts had worked first with their local school boards and later with patrons to sell the idea that if mandates were to be properly implemented more time was needed for teachers to acquire the skills necessary. Recognizing that significant change must be preceded by time for planning, implementing, and institutionalizing (Crandel et al. 1986) a board member, understanding the enormous task ahead insisted, "It was not a hard sell to the community. Citing teacher time as a critical form of administrative support (Bay et al. 1999) top level administrators sought to make sure that all teachers had the time to do what was needed of them. The consensus in all three districts was that "teachers had been utilizing that time."

Time was an issue for staff who viewed HF 2272 as just one more thing on their already full plates. Administrators were very aware of the demands made on their teachers stating, "Teachers are valued less and less. They are being asked to do more, and more, and more." Several voiced an initial belief that they had seen supposed school improvement efforts come and go, and "this too would pass." Bay et al. noted "Making major curricular change is like bicycling in the mountains: you work hard to master one challenge only to meet another" (p. 504). Those staff nearing retirement were reported to profess "You aren't going to make me do anymore."

Administrators were not immune to the time crunch. "You know, it's just tough for me to put the time and energy into what I really got trained to do. You just run out of hours. You have great thoughts in the middle of the night, but it never gets put on paper," reported a secondary principal. "I'm superintendent and elementary principal. Plus I'm involved in

school improvement and everything from the lunchroom to buses.” was the concern of another administrator. But he did understand “our teachers tend to be that way too.”

Most viewed the mandates as positive overall, and that while it might take more time, “a lot of this just has to come on your own to get finished,” it was beneficial for students and ultimately the district. A realization had set in with some teaching staff understanding “it doesn’t pay to gripe about it. I think you create your own time.”

Only a handful of participants questioned the implementation timeline. Recognizing that larger districts might have some personnel expertise that smaller districts could not afford, it was equally understood that larger districts “may not be as nimble as smaller districts in responding to pressures for change” (Hannaway & Kimball, 2001, p. 102). Small school practitioners thought perhaps the size of their districts might have been a blessing as they were used to functioning district-wide. Conversations about mandates sometimes referred to as “hallway meetings” were common before school, at lunch, and during planning times. With K-12 staff all housed at the same site, it was not a difficult task to organize meetings quickly and to follow up.

Workload. Participants appreciated the understanding administrators demonstrated for the increased workload. In particular they viewed the curriculum directors as partners in the implementation process. Curriculum directors shared this belief realizing the value of “coming up through the system” and having the credibility with the teaching staff that “I don’t ask them to do anything I’m not doing myself” because of the teaching responsibility several curriculum directors carried in addition to their administrative duties. As a group, teaching staff felt that they sometimes went about their work begrudgingly but they got it done. One teacher expressed the general sentiment this way: “we all grunt and groan a little bit but we do

it anyway. Everyone seems to come on board. And those that don't, they have to do it anyway." Some noted that the size of the staff was an asset in that "no one can hide" a belief that it was difficult for anyone to avoid the scrutiny of administrators and colleagues.

In short, according to one educator, "choosing not to change was never an option."

But this is not to suggest that it was easy to take on the added tasks of 2272. "They never take anything away. The plate just keeps getting fuller," said one respondent, echoing a common theme among participants. As Crandel et al. (1986) describe it "planning for, implementing, and institutionalizing a significant change usually consumes an inordinate amount of time. School people are already busy and rarely in a position to delegate or drop some of their responsibilities while they take on new ones" (p. 42).

Money. Teaching staff and several administrators expressed satisfaction with past efforts to garner grant money for implementation activities. This was important in that teachers "were willing to put in the time" if the district had made a good-faith effort to pay them. A superintendent was thankful his district had been able to "buy some time at night and in the summers." Most were fearful that this well would run dry as economic conditioners worsened. There was little surprise that HF 2272 appeared to be one more un-funded mandate handed down by legislators who some teaching staff saw as uncaring or unknowing. Sirotnik (2002) showed little patience with state policymakers who want reform but want it cost-free. The public, he said, should not let politicians off the hook: "the gap between what politicians and policymakers say they want for public education and the actual mustering of will, commitment, and resources necessary to do something authentic about it" (p. 671) is sometimes very wide. It is unrealistic, he suggests, to expect deep reform without underwriting the capacity-building necessary to achieve it.

Change process. It was difficult to recognize much difference between simple teacher resistance and the larger issue of dealing with change. Change resistance was more likely to be recognized as an issue by administration than by teaching staff. Several administrators spoke at length about the change process and the preparation the administration had undertaken as critical to making the mandates meaningful for their teachers and the district. One superintendent believed his district had benefited from talking about the change process early on and even going so far as to give the various stages of change names such as “grief and denial.” But he also realized that not everyone would handle the implementation process. The decision was sometimes made to “not water the rocks.” Rather time was spent “watering the flowers, because the plants will grow. Don’t waste your water on rocks.”

Teacher turnover. A final barrier to implementation that administrators in small districts described was that of retention of teachers. “I’ve had five resource teachers in five years,” one administrator asserted, underscoring a problem of both attracting and retaining good teachers. This was especially problematic in the math and science areas. Teachers and administrators alike expressed concern for the quality of applicants attracted to their small districts in these highly sought after academic fields. To make matters worse, the time spent in-servicing these educators only to have them leave and hire again a year or two later was expensive, disruptive and in some ways made it necessary to start the implementation process start all over again. “I worry about getting people to come here” and “math and science people are especially difficult for us to attract and keep” were common concerns for district administrators. A former superintendent in one of the districts put it bluntly: “Sometimes you just need a body.” The hope that a strong mentoring program might improve a marginal

employee was tempered with the knowledge that the effort might need to be repeated on a regular basis.

Intent vs. Motive

Figuring out what, on one hand, legislators intended and, on the other hand, what their motives were proved to be problematic for many of the participants in the study. Some believed the intent of the law was to provide a structure for improving accountability in Iowa school districts. A board member and teacher participant shared nearly identical beliefs in thinking that the intent was accountability. "I think they (legislature) just wanted us to be more accountable. So that what we say is happening at the school can be proven." Others saw underlying motivations as evidenced by this statement from a rural administrator, "My evil answer is they want to get rid of small schools."

The strongest and most commonly held sentiment had to do with forced school consolidation. Knowing how politically radioactive such merger talks could be, many participants believed politicians had used HF 2272 as a means of disguising their efforts to force Iowa's small districts out of business. Though a few of the interviewees totally discounted the idea that forced consolidation of small school districts was a motive, for most this idea was at the forefront of their thoughts about why HF 2272 had been passed. Some argued that politicians did not have the courage "to go on record" in their attempts to close or consolidate small school districts. "Instead of squeezing us monetarily, they can squeeze us by overwhelming us," was the belief of one educator.

One teacher wondered if "this was the result of the federal government warning not just small schools, but also the state of Iowa to become more accountable to them. Prove to us what you are doing works, when you're not doing what we want you to do." Others almost

disdainfully shrugged off what they saw as “yet another attempt” to make life difficult for rural Iowa school districts citing “eight man football” and other adaptations small districts had been making for years.

Few had any difficulty with accountability as such. Whether the intentions came from a desire to maintain Iowa’s reputation as a national leader in student achievement or as a response to a perceived decline in standardized test scores, educators understood the elevated priority that education holds for most Iowans. One small school superintendent viewed the mandates as a legislative response to “the changing realities of the work place.” Others saw the mandates as an effort to “improve the quality of education for students, to increase student achievement, and to encourage teachers to look more closely at student progress.” So for most participants requirements on the school district to insure that schools were performing at a desired level were understandable.

Concerns about the economy and a suspected fear that legislators believed “small schools aren’t as efficient” also had an impact on policy makers as they debated the merits of HF 2272, according to several participants. Many participants believed small school districts in particular should fear the motivations of the state level policy makers. These participants believed that the worsening Iowa economy and the higher costs of rural education might be an impetus for legislators to mandate small districts into requirements that would be difficult for them to adhere to. Echoing the financial aspect, others offered that “legislators don’t think they can afford the number of districts in the state of Iowa,” and were simply trying to guarantee that taxpayers were getting their money’s worth.

“They want to squeeze us,” said a high school teacher. He continued, “Can we make more hoops for them to jump through to the point small schools will just give up and merge

with somebody else.” An assessment specialist concluded, “I’m concerned people in urban areas don’t understand rural education. I think eventually the state might have to come to the conclusion it is going to cost more to educate in rural areas.” But she showed genuine understanding by saying, “Our school can do all of the greatest things in the world, but if we don’t have kids, it’s not going to make any difference anyway.” Some rural educators clearly feared the personal attention all students could receive in their districts was not valued in the statehouse.

Already content with the school/community relationship in their small districts, it was difficult for these rural educators to identify with a need to be more accountable to or listen more to their patrons. Several believed the state should not focus on size so much as emphasis should be placed on “quality.” A feeling that “quality is not dictated by the number of course offerings” but rather “quality is determined by the people and programs in the school” seemed a more logical measurement for effective school settings to many rural educators in this study. Still a few others nevertheless put a positive spin on the mandate, seeing opportunities for school districts to further partner with parents and the whole communities they served.

A final thought on this topic came from an administrator: “Students needed to come out of a small district with a degree that meant the same thing as a degree from any Iowa district,” but she wondered if HF 2272 might soon be obsolete as the state would soon be dealing with the ramifications of the No Child Left Behind mandates. It was her belief that we (Iowa schools) would soon “all be dancing to a national song.”

Unintended Consequences

There was some disagreement at the local level concerning the impact of 2272 on the actual instruction that students received. Elmore pointed to the ambivalence and perhaps the art and science that policy implementation is even now: "We do not clearly understand," he said, what a policy should be until we have thought about how it will be implemented" (p. 92).

Educators were concerned that aspects of a balanced education might suffer, as HF 2272 became more ingrained in the local district's culture. A board member, on the other hand, was quick to offer "they (the state) are spotlighting the three most important areas in finding if my children are prepared to go on after high school. You need to have well-rounded students who have exposure to the arts and sports, but to keep math, reading, and science as the top priorities, that's as it should be." Teachers were not so sure that the procedures required in 2272 were not responsible for the curriculum being overly narrowed, pointing to specific areas of concern, including the means of assessment, feared losses in non-mandated school offerings, ethical practices, and compliance requirements.

Assessment. Teachers were not happy with the increased emphasis on standardized testing. Sirotnik (2002) suggests "Assessment systems are about creating and using ways to collect information on teaching and learning and about making appraisals or judgements based on that information. Accountability systems are about what is done with these appraisals" (p. 665). Teachers oftentimes saw little correlation between what they were teaching and what certain tests measured. The support for more challenging tests exists everywhere, (Massel, 2001) as administrators view them as supportive of good instruction—but these views "coexist with criticisms of the tests" (p. 160). Hesitantly, one elementary

teacher admitted, "It would be fair to say that I divert my attention away from our regular standards and benchmarks so my students will do well on standardized tests."

Another teacher, knowing she better have specific material covered added, "We all know that standardized tests are given at certain times. There's a lot of pressure on both teachers and students to perform." Elmore (2002) adds to the point in suggesting that issues of student performance are mired in questions of "whose responsibility is it"—state, federal, district, school and classroom? He put it succinctly: "the problem of who is actually responsible for student failure has become deeply politicized" (p. 9). Iowa educators, acknowledged that "district-wide assessments have their place," but would agree with Sirotnik (2002) in preferring to use "classroom assessments and day-to-day observations" to ascertain the progress of children (p. 665). He goes on to describe a responsible accountability system as one where evaluation of student learning is based upon multiple measures to include both quantitative and qualitative measures spread over time. "No modern organization," he said, "would ever use a lone indicator to judge the worth of its operation" (p. 665). Teachers who believe they "know what students need" also voiced concern for the amount of instructional time that was now needed to adhere to the rigors of HF 2272. Some chose to institute fundamental change in their classroom practices by tacking reform on to existing ways of doing things (Cohen & Hill, 2001). The concern among participants in this study were those underscored by Sirotnik (2002) in that 2272 was putting into question "the professional judgement of educators as a central and critically important feature of any responsible system designed to demonstrate what students know and are able to do. Ultimately, educators should know more about any given child than any test can tell us" (p. 669).

final concern dealt with the tiny numbers of some classes in Iowa's small districts.

Believing "newspapers don't give the whole picture" some educators worried that the loss or addition of even one or two children at a single grade level could greatly impact the class score. Program consequences were magnified for small districts when staff move, new students come into the district, or other demands compete (McLaughlin, 1987).

Losses in non-mandated school offerings. Though no one argued with the importance of student success in the measured areas of math, science, and reading, some worried that other curricular areas would receive less emphasis. Other core course staff as well as technology and fine arts educators had not lost sight that their areas of expertise were not likely to be valued to the extent they might desire. An art teacher understood that she needed to "take a practical approach" and sometimes understand "that money has to go to other places." One administrator, professing a belief that the design of the improvement model while intended "to bring everyone in" might in fact actually cause some "to feel left out."

This fear among some participants in each district was underscored in the realization that already some aspects of the affective curriculum had been eroded. All three districts had spent considerable time in the three years previous to HF 2272, developing programming to address not only academic concerns, but also behavioral, social, and emotional domains. Guidance personnel in particular feared "emphasis on accountability, achievement, and improvement initiatives were causing other areas to not get the focus they deserved." Numerous studies have shown that parents want much more for their children than what is assessed on standardized tests (Sirotnik, 2002). With mandated reporting centralizing on math, reading, and science school district personnel feared a loss of progress believed established with parents and the community as a whole.

Ethical issues. Some concern was expressed for those individuals or school districts “other districts” that might choose to circumvent the mandates and spend inordinate amounts of time teaching directly to the state assessments. Others feared that a district might opt to not test all students or even alter reports. School districts lacking an already existing “organizational culture” with a “weak instructional core might tend to ‘game’ the system” (Elmore, 2002, p. 19). It did not go unnoticed that surrounding districts had done little other than to “borrow” someone else’s improvement plans, insert their own district’s name, and go on about business. Several participants wondered about the value of such a document, and the lack of teeth HF 2272 obviously had if such activities could occur and not be addressed.

Compliance requirements. In each of the districts studied a conscious decision had been reached early on by administration to manage all compliance issues at the administrative level and to foster a belief with teaching staff that their job was simply to teach and work to improve classroom instruction. This was well stated by one superintendent who felt “compliance is the minimal. It’s the least important thing.” Administrators would deal with the bureaucracy, leaving teachers to “deal with what’s good for the kids in the district.” Efforts were made to allow the superintendents and the curriculum directors to be the information channel for both incoming and out-going information.

Advice to Legislators

District participants were unified in their advice to legislators. Four recommendations were heard consistently: first, listen to educators. In fact “come out to our schools and visit us” was heard over and over. It was clearly evident that small school practitioners felt they had no voice. Second, give the Department of Education the time to develop rules so that

policy is clear and ambiguity is avoided. Third, understand “not one size fits all” and not all communities value the same things. Finally, fund what you mandate.

Listen to the educators. Because of the professional and intimate nature of teaching, practitioners wanted, and believed they deserved a respectful hearing. Teachers didn’t believe “educators buy into stuff that gets mandated top down unless they have a voice in deciding.” Teachers asked that designers (lawmakers) “stand in the shoes of the target and ask ‘How does this rule affect me?’” (Stone, 2002, p. 300). Allowing non-teaching private sector professionals to impact education mandates was an unthinkable act for many participants asking that legislators “get out of the perception business and into the reality business.” Much of what had been mandated seemed so arbitrary to educators who “like knowing what’s going on.” According to Elmore (1979-1980), “the closer one is to the source of the problem, the greater one’s ability to influence it; and the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control but on maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate” (p. 605). An elementary teacher added, “If it’s important for me to make changes in my classroom, who is saying I need to make changes, why are they saying I need to make changes, and are these changes really beneficial to my students?” Cohen and Hill (2001) suggested policymakers are often not well informed “about the effects of their endeavors; they make no attempt to learn systematically about how the reforms played out in schools and classrooms” (p. 187). Teachers were reluctant to implement policies that did not respond adequately to these questions.

Avoid ambiguity. While some participants were critical of the Iowa Department of Education, “they (DE) rushed us through this with little thought” others perhaps more knowledgeable, empathized with the department’s plight. One superintendent said, “I feel

sorry for those folks at the DE. They're good people and getting way more grief than they deserve." Other participants focused their attention on the performance of a legislature that they viewed as "insensitive to the needs of teachers." One teacher stated, "I think their (legislature) credibility is bad. They've carried too many messages to us and then reneged." Another added, "Make mandates clear. Figure out what you want before you have us scurry around trying to do what we think you want only to have you change your mind. It is very frustrating." DeSoto (2000) suggests that this is not a new phenomenon in implementation, in fact, it is often the case that "formal laws don't coincide with how things actually work" (p. 92). An elementary principal asked only that legislators concern themselves with "what they want as a result. He further requested that policy makers "set the vision" for what they want and "put some accountability with it. Then get the hell out of the way!"

One size (does not) fit all. The "one size fits all" mentality of HF 2272 was an anathema to small Iowa school districts. They feared efforts had gone into conducting community meetings to set the priorities for the district had all gone for naught. "It's (HF 2272) not a magic pill. It's a mandate, a piece of legislation," argued one curriculum director. She continued, "It takes people and it takes time to do what they want us to do. You can't just focus on academics. You have to look at the whole child." With an already existing belief in the value of every child and knowledge of the "extra baggage" so many of their students brought to school, these districts did not need legislators many miles away telling them how to best educate their district's children.

A guidance counselor asked **that** legislators "take into account students having more problems than ever before." She identified positive early childhood experiences and improved parenting skill development as bigger concerns for the state than issues of declining

standardized test scores. With dropout rates almost nonexistent and participation rates nearing 100 %, small districts saw themselves as already having programming in place that engaged and motivated students. They did not need increased standardized testing and reporting requirements to offset already successful programs.

Funding. Being required to do more with less had become a part of the Iowa small school context. Participants offered little surprise or hope that funding would follow mandates, but did chide legislators. “If you don’t fund things, don’t expect them to get done or done well.” Others believed legislators simply lost sight of “how much this would cost and how long it might take. Elmore (2002) suggested without the capacity building support system, legislation is only capable of measuring the results of the system; there is no framework for improving it:

Accountability systems do not produce performance; they mobilize incentives, engagement, agency, and capacity that produces performance. Accountability systems do not, for the most part, reflect any systematic coordination of capacity and accountability, nor do they reflect any clear understanding of what capacities are required to meet expectations for performance and where the responsibility for enhancing those capacities lies. A more specific and coherent theory of action for accountability systems would help. . . . Whose responsibility is it to insure that these conditions are met? If it is the state that initiates the accountability requirements, then it is the state’s responsibility to assure that the capacities are in place to meet those requirements (p.13).

A final thought came from participants who believed “there are certain things legislators need to stay out of. Given the resources, schools will do a good job with kids.

Summary of Then and Now in an “Active” District

Across all three districts the legislative requirements of HF 2272 were communicated to instructional staff and the communities primarily through the superintendents and curriculum directors. These individuals were being informed by their professional organizations, through attendance at educational meetings, and through dialogue with other

professionals. Curriculum directors in particular saw great value in “hands-on, real-life conversations” with other professionals also charged with policy implementation. “We could figure out what was meant and how we might be able to do things,” stated one educator. These key administrative participants took their time before rushing to pass the word of impending mandates to their colleagues, as they “were not always hearing the same messages.” Some degree of frustration was expressed in all three districts with the on again/off again nature of the legislative interpretations. Pragmatic educators fell into a “tell me what I need to do” mentality focusing more on the task than the process. “There were some bumps in the road early on,” stated one superintendent. It was through these problems that the ability to make it a “meaningful document” for the district was realized.

For all participants, value was seen in the previous school improvement work districts had done in establishing working community groups, writing standards and benchmarks, and joining subject-specific study teams. This was consistent with the findings of Clune (2001), and Hannaway and Kimball (2001) in that success was built on pre-existing reform efforts of the 1980s, with continuity between the two time periods proving crucial. “Past experience in reform was a strong predictor of current success” (p. 269). Each of these districts had working school improvement plans in place prior to HF 2272. None had been developed with “just someone stuck in room somewhere making a decision that no one can buy in to.” “Everyone has a lot of ownership in the school improvement plan,” stated one curriculum director. Transformational school leaders build commitment in their teaching staffs, develop beliefs about teaching and learning, and create a vision of what the school district can become (Sergiovanni, 1990). When the new mandates of HF 2272 were presented by administrators,

some viewed this as an opportunity for “dusting off the stuff we’d already done and start applying it.”

Administrators were viewed as generally sympathetic to the implementation needs of the teaching staff. There *was* little thought of “someone is out to get me” or “this is just some more busy work.” School Improvement Teams were trusted to “look at the big picture” and to determine the best course of action for meeting mandates.

In two of the districts administrators also served as classroom teachers and one believed this allowed for staff knowledge that he “wasn’t going to throw them any curves.” Another teacher/administrator offered, “Being a teacher brings me credibility. They know I won’t make them do anything I wouldn’t do myself. I wasn’t seen as telling them what to do. I was doing it with them.” Teaching staff believed their principals and superintendents had served them well in “continuously trying to make us better” and many subscribed to the idea that “even if there was no legislative mandate, we’d still be progressive in doing things right.” In the end, policymakers had not so much dictated what mattered in these active districts as they had underscored what locals thought anyway. Will and capacity were in place, with policy addressing the issue of capacity and will reflective of the implementation assessment of the value of that policy (McLaughlin, 1987).

Participants were unanimous in their appreciation of the efforts of Area Education Agency consultants, expressing their appreciation in glowing terms such as “we’ve been blessed” in having their help. Teachers and administrators described AEA personnel as “vital partners in the staff development efforts.” Others appreciated the “tremendous expertise” and “willingness to locate information and get right back to you.” Participants thought they needed to rely perhaps more heavily on AEA support than educators in larger districts as

small districts might not have the “layers of leadership and expertise” a larger district might offer. Hannaway and Kimball (2001) saw the necessity of specialized help: “the findings draw attention to the special challenges of reform faced by small districts and call for targeted assistance to these districts to pool resources and acquire specialized help when needed” (p. 120). The assistance small school practitioners received during structured in-service training as well as individual or small group presentations were seen as valuable to their learning and implementation efforts.

In reviewing state-directed reform in education, a school board member caught the spirit of the core issue with state policy mandates: “All the mandates in the world aren’t going to make a difference. It has to come from within.” Timar and Kirp (1987) offer similar sentiments: “Excellence cannot be coerced or mandated. Rather, it is a condition to which individuals may aspire” (p. 309). Linking statehouse policy with classroom practices in ways that make a difference for children was the implementer’s challenge—and lament.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

In 1998, the Iowa Legislature passed House File 2272 (Accountability For Student Learning Act). The enactment of this bill required all Iowa public school districts to begin the processes of developing standards and benchmarks for student learning and reporting annually to the state and their local patrons.

Of the 371 school districts in the state of Iowa, nearly 20% had fewer than 400 students K-12. Larger districts with their layers of leadership and expertise were often hard-pressed to meet the mandates put in place with HF 2272. Yet Iowa's small districts were required to meet the same standards as their much larger counterparts.

Iowa's small districts faced challenges that made their very existence a concern, not just for the school community, but also the small town or towns that made up the local school district. The problem of this study then, was to learn, describe, and understand how the educators from Iowa's small districts planned, strategized, and implemented HF 2272. Further, this study sought recommendations for legislators as they fine-tuned existing policy or designed new policy. This was one of seven FINE-supported studies of Iowa's accountability legislation.

The purpose of this policy implementation study was to explore and understand the perceptions and issues of educational practitioners in small Iowa school districts as they related to the local district implementation of HF 2272. Teachers, administrators, and board members from small schools had the opportunity to share their policy implementation efforts. It was hoped that through this study, insights might be gained that will assist other small

school educators and hopefully also be shared with policymakers as they rethink and rewrite legislation.

Five research questions guided this study:

1. How did HF 2272 change what districts were required to do?
2. Did small districts have the necessary resources and skills to implement HF 2272?
3. What was the process used to implement HF 2272?
4. In your opinion of implementation in small districts, why did the legislature enact HF 2272?
5. What recommendations do you have for legislators regarding future policy design and implementation?

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted in three small, rural school districts with K-12 populations of less than 400. These in-depth, one-on-one interviews included superintendents, principals, teachers, and board members. Three similar protocols were used to interview participants dependant on their role within the district. Interviews were transcribed, preliminary coding schemes were developed, and the constant comparative method was used to categorize data. Relevant school district documents and field notes were also reviewed. After analyzing site data, a report was written for each district. The researcher then looked across site reports for emerging themes. Included in the across-site report was a brief review of the literature on accountability, standards-based reform, policy implementation, and leadership.

Themes from the across-site report included: (1) HF 2272 did not hinder school/community relations, and perhaps enhanced it; (2) while the perceived intent was increased accountability, small school educators felt threatened and were angered with

suspected legislative motives of consolidating or closing small schools; (3) more formalized assessment procedures were developed and school reported becoming more data-driven; (4) common barriers of time and money existed, but change issues, teacher value systems, and teacher turnover were formidable issues as well; (5) skilled leadership was able to partner with teaching staff, the community, and outside agencies to successfully facilitate implementation; (6) unintended consequences included increased workload for educators, disappointment over the perceived lack of respect shown to teachers by policymakers, and a concern over the potential losses of non-mandated programming; and (7) educators hoped future policy decisions would include more voice for those being impacted.

Change was difficult. It became even more so when intent, interpretation, and implementation were not conducted in partnership. While HF 2272 was one of the driving forces in Iowa school accountability, the rank and file educator was left at the local level to make the mandates meaningful to students, the community, and ultimately the state.

Conclusions

Based on the data gathered for this study, several conclusions were derived:

Conclusion 1: What went before proved critical to what came after.

By the very definition of being “active” school districts had a “jump start” on the implementation of new mandates. Interviewees were quick to point out that their inclusion and involvement in school improvement initiatives, dating back to the 1980s had allowed for a comfort level that allowed for trust and confidence in a process to which they had grown accustomed. Effective leadership was in place at multiple levels of the HF 2272 implementation process. Many of these leaders had risen through the local teaching ranks and had earned the respect and trust of educators and community members.

The result was a policy implementation plan strengthened with a solid foundation that included pillars of community, leadership, followership, knowledge, assessment, and reporting. Each of these pillars had been components of previous efforts and proved crucial to the implementation of HF 2272.

Conclusion 2: The superintendent/curriculum director partnership was the initiation, the momentum, and the energy for keeping things going.

While acknowledging the contributions of many leaders at multiple levels of the implementation process, interviewees were highly cognizant of the leadership role played by the district central office staff. Superintendents and curriculum practitioners were the points of entry for information about HF 2272, made the determinations about dissemination of the information, conducted the training for teaching staff, and supported other district administrators as they guided the efforts in their buildings. If outside expertise was needed or grant monies were to be procured, it was the superintendent/curriculum director partnership that spearheaded the effort.

The connection with the community was also the responsibility of this tandem. Town meetings, Annual Progress Report writing, and final development of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan were all tasks accomplished by these individuals. Successful implementation efforts were in great part attributed to this vital partnership.

Conclusion 3: Implementation beyond compliance not only took time and money; it took strong human relations and conceptual skills.

It was again the insightful thought processes of central office staff that allowed for success that went far beyond simple compliance with HF 2272. Leadership expressed an understanding not only of the change process, but more precisely was able to personalize

change to their leadership teams, teaching staff, and the community. Leadership had a vision of how the total process would occur. The grand scheme was then reduced to planning for certain activities to occur at pre-determined times to allow implementers the necessary time to make not just academic change, but also to allow for the personal cognitive adjustments teachers had to make.

Leadership was realistic about the willingness of their teachers. The statement “we don’t water the rocks” showed a realization that a few veteran teachers had seen many initiatives come and go and were somewhat hesitant to get too excited about another new mandate. But administrators also recognized the strength they had in being small, “where it’s difficult to hide.” Teacher-leaders were nurtured and used as models for others to emulate. The added strength of curriculum directors, assessment coordinators, and even administrators who were also a part of the teaching staff gave great credibility to the implementation efforts. Leadership recognized this, and used it.

Conclusion 4: Policy was difficult to implement because educators saw a conflict between policy intent and the implementation reality.

A lack of trust and confidence may have been the key components for educators who struggled with the expressed intent of HF 2272 as they tried to reconcile those intentions with their past experiences. While educators saw increased accountability for Iowa school districts as an understandable intent of the Iowa legislature, it was the more covert motives that caused their suspicions. The closing or forced consolidation of small districts was in the back of nearly all interviewees’ minds as they tried to make sense of HF 2272.

The emphasis on standardized testing to determine the academic worth of a child and the success of a school district seemed to educators to accent what they viewed as a declining role for the classroom teacher and to further decrease the prestige of the teaching profession.

Conclusion 5: We can do this! Small districts were very accustomed to making necessary adaptations in curriculum, instruction, administration, teaching assignments, and extra-curricular activities as the needs arose. HF 2272 was one more necessary adaptation.

If even a partial intent of HF 2272 was to drive small districts into a state of frustration ultimately leading to consolidation talks, it was lost on these active districts. Past experiences had served them well. Much like the early settlers would “circle the wagons” in times of attack, so too had small school districts learned to make the necessary adaptations that had allowed them to remain not only in existence, but to serve as the hub of community activity.

Shared duties by administrators and teachers allowed for cost-savings in personnel. More and more patrons were employed to serve as coaches and consultants. AEA personnel provided advisory services and assistance with curricular and instructional concerns. Even activities had been re-aligned through sharing agreements with neighboring districts or the adoption of eight-man football. HF 2272 was one more challenge that would require another adaptive change.

Conclusion 6: As the level of policymaker involvement increases, so must their level of understanding and responsibility.

Educators resented legislative mandates. The fact that non-educators were making decisions they viewed as falling into areas formerly and normally the preserve of educator expertise both confused and angered educators. A “one size fits all” mentality only served to further strengthen the belief that small schools were not a primary concern of legislators who

practitioners saw as catering to the needs of larger districts. They believed their academic successes with students, in partnership with other valued domains such as discipline, attendance, graduation rates, and participation should be more appreciated and valued by legislators.

A final plea to policymakers included a request for time and money to implement change. If educators were going to be told to what to do, and essentially how to do it, then there must be some responsibility on the part of legislators to provide the resources necessary to implement the desired change.

Implications

Implication 1: The will and capacity of small schools and towns may be equal to or greater than that of policymakers.

Policymakers may underestimate the verve of small schools and their patrons. Small school educators don't believe legislators have the courage to challenge them at the ballot box. As long as districts are financially solvent, teachers and administrators can be hired, and children are graduating who are either successfully attending post-secondary institutions or finding work opportunities, small school communities will cherish their schools, their sports teams, and their children.

Implication 2: Small schools will continue to lose students, money, and skilled practitioners.

The budget guarantee has been a valuable tool for the state's small districts. As that guarantee is phased out, small districts will face an increasingly difficult task. Salaries for teaching staff and skilled administrators will likely lose more ground to larger districts. As the number of rural families continues to dwindle, fewer and fewer students will attend small district schools. Money follows students. Ultimately a lack of money will force the difficult closing or consolidation discussions that may be imminent for many small districts.

Implication 3: Legislative mandates will continue to publicly promote more accountability and hence better education, but will privately tighten the noose on small schools.

It's very difficult to argue with accountability and promotion of higher standards. Policymakers are on solid ground and it makes for good speech material at election time. In 1998, when the Iowa legislature passed HF 2272, it was assumed by policymakers that this piece of legislation would usher in the next round of school consolidations in the state. If the aging facilities of many small districts could be deemed to not meet the educational needs of students, or if students were not performing as desired, it could be possible that districts would be forced to combine with neighboring districts.

HF 2272 wasn't the first time such legislation had been passed. As recently as 1988 standards for schools had been implemented that precipitated sharing of teachers and students among several school districts across the state. This ultimately led to reorganization between the participating districts. This process was further promoted by legislation providing financial incentives to districts to reorganize by July 1, 1993. A strong argument might be made that HF 2272 requirements were intentionally designed to result in another round of school closings and reorganizations.

Implication 4: The rural "lifestyle" as we know it will continue to decline.

Rural Iowa is losing the family farms, the small businesses, and ultimately the people. One interviewee in this study put it the best when she said, "We can do all of the wonderful things we do. But if we don't have any children, it's not going to make any difference." Many of the smallest districts in Iowa are now facing entire grade levels with just a handful of students. Districts that had been able to justify two sections at each grade level **are now** "creatively" combining some small grade levels or placing associates in classrooms to lower

the adult/pupil ratio in one large section that must exist as it's too costly to maintain two sections.

The loss of population leads to a loss of business. Small merchants will continue to be squeezed by the large chain stores and the lure of bigger and more attractive shopping opportunities in the larger metropolitan areas. This spiral, that sucks in all social, economic, and educational sectors, sees no end in sight. Regardless of legislative intent, the demography of rural Iowa is likely to dictate more school consolidation. The only remaining question is how and when it will be done. If the reorganization process does not proceed on a timeline sufficient to meet the needs of an ailing Iowa economy or the desires of legislators, more stringent mandates may be in the offing.

Implication 6: Enterprise and education zones might well be the wave of the future in Iowa.

The Iowa economy, both propelled by and propelling shifts in the economy, may see drastic changes in the next 20 years. Biotechnology and its impact on the agri-business of Iowa could well re-shape the economic future for the state. Enterprise zones catering to various aspects of the biotechnology business are a natural, if optimistic, view of the state. Those communities that have best positioned themselves to benefit from such business development would be a magnet, drawing populations, communities, and school districts into their orbits. Small districts as we know them will die, as will small towns. In this scenario, fewer and fewer laborers will be needed to run larger and larger operations. Cities and suburbs will flourish while the rural Iowa landscape could likely change from small towns and acre after acre of cropland to mile after mile of corporate farms and few residences.

If current trends continue in the manner that interviewees in this study portrayed them to date, large magnet school districts will initially attract students from many miles away and

transportation issues will exist. But over time, families will **gravitate** to their jobs and the entertainment opportunities provided by the new enterprise areas of the state.

Recommendations to Policymakers

Respondents did not hesitate in making recommendations for legislators to contemplate when considering future educational policy for Iowa schools.

Recommendation 1: Include educators in designing educational policy that affects them.

Teachers believed that for the long haul educators needed to have a meaningful voice in policy making that involves the teaching of children. Changes in the classroom, regardless of the origin of the changes, had to meet several criteria for teachers to value them: Who was saying teachers must make changes (authority), why are they saying I must make changes (rationale), and are these changes really beneficial to students (show me)? Unless teachers had adequate answers to these questions, they were reluctant to implement new policies.

Recommendation 2: Give the Department of Education the time necessary to write the rules.

"Good people getting way more grief than they deserve" was the way one administrator described Department of Education personnel. Many districts felt mixed messages had been carried to the front lines and because of this, ambiguity muddled the waters for many practitioners. Different answers from different quarters at various times over the implementation process produced frustration and even anger. Educators hoped that future mandates would show more vision and understanding by policymakers and that legislators would concern themselves more with the desired result, and leave the implementation to local educators.

Recommendation 3: Design a more flexible policy taking into account that one size does not fit all.

The thought of legislators many miles away telling local educators how to best meet the needs of their students confused and further angered interviewees. Bonds of trust and understanding had been previously established with community members. With non-existent dropout rates, and participation rates nearing 100 per cent, small districts saw themselves as already having programming in place that would nurture and motivate students. Increased emphasis on standardized testing and more rigorous reporting requirements to the community were not viewed as benefits to already successful programs.

Recommendation 4: Fund what you mandate.

Doing more with less was part of the small school landscape and had been for a long time. Some participants simply thought legislators were blind to how long implementation might take or how much it would cost to do it well and to make it meaningful. The fact that the Iowa legislature had implemented more un-funded educational legislation came as a surprise to no one. This was just one more episode for educators.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendation 1: Conduct a similar study in a district deemed “not active.”

There is an understood problematic nature to this recommendation as knowledge-elites may be hesitant to identify those districts that are struggling with implementation issues. Gaining access through a district gatekeeper may also be difficult or impossible, as few will agree to share “dirty laundry.” But clearly some districts have fared better in their implementation challenges. It would be informative to look at the success levels of those districts that were not actively engaged in school improvement prior to HF 2272.

Recommendation 2: Conduct a follow-up study in the three small districts included in this study.

Ten years from now each of these three districts could look very different than they did at the time of this study. New leadership will be in place that may or may not embrace the current district styles. New mandates will surely have been passed that will have impacted the districts to varying degrees. The budget guarantee will be a thing of the past and small districts will have increasing financial pressures with which to deal. Though such research may be impossible to conduct, as each of these districts may no longer exist in the form it did for this study, a dispersed population will remain a reality at least in the sense of more and less densely populated regions. Relatively small schools will continue to be a feature of the Iowa landscape and will be worth studying for the very reasons that participants in this study made so abundantly clear.

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APPENDIX A

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol
Teacher Version

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol

Teacher Version

From what you know, what are school improvement mandates (2272) intended to do?
How did you learn about the school improvement mandates (2272), at first and as it unfolded?

Tell me about ways that you think the district is really different as a result of the school improvement process.

How has your district's plan impacted your role as a teacher?

Would you say your school is more capable and willing to take on new challenges in the future?

Do you feel you had the necessary resources and skills to implement your district's goals?

What did your district do to help you and/or others develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

Do you feel your school provided the necessary resources such as time, money, expertise to implement school improvement mandates?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

Do you feel school improvement mandates served to "jump start" your district's reform efforts or did it supplement what you were already doing?

Did school improvement mandates divert time and resources from other reform efforts going on in the district before they were passed?

Share with me the process your district utilized to implement school improvement mandates.

What were some of the supports to the implementation process?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

What were some of the barriers to the implementation process?

Are these much the same barriers both before and after the mandates?

What might you suggest to do differently the next time around?

Why do you think the legislature enacted school improvement mandates?

What do you think they saw as the need?

Do you think they are getting what they hoped for?

From your experience with the school improvement process, what do you recommend to legislators about how to make legislation helpful to districts?

What would you recommend to legislators in future implementation efforts?

Appendix B

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol
Administrator Version

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol

Administrator Version

From what you know, what are school improvement mandates (2272) intended to do?
How did you learn about the school improvement mandates (2272), at first and as it unfolded?

Tell me about ways that you think the district is really different as a result of the school improvement process.

How has your district's plan impacted your role as an administrator?

Would you say your school is more capable and willing to take on new challenges in the future?

Do you feel your staff had the necessary resources and skills to implement your district's goals?

What did your district do to help you and/or others develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

Do you feel your school provided the necessary resources such as time, money, expertise to implement school improvement mandates?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

Do you feel school improvement mandates served to "jump start" your district's reform efforts or did it supplement what you were already doing?

Did school improvement mandates divert time and resources from other reform efforts going on in the district before they were passed?

Share with me the process your district utilized to implement school improvement mandates.

What were some of the supports to the implementation process?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

What were some of the barriers to the implementation process?

Are these much the same barriers both before and after the mandates?

What might you suggest to do differently the next time around?

Why do you think the legislature enacted school improvement mandates?

What do you think they saw as the need?

Do you think they are getting what they hoped for?

From your experience with the school improvement process, what do you recommend to legislators about how to make legislation helpful to districts?

What would you recommend to legislators in future implementation efforts?

Appendix C

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol
Board Member Version

HF 2272 Implementation Study
Interview Protocol

Board Member Version

From what you know, what are school improvement mandates (2272) intended to do?
How did you learn about the school improvement mandates (2272), at first and as it unfolded?

Tell me about ways that you think the district is really different as a result of the school improvement process.

How has your district's plan impacted your role as a board member?

Are you more or less involved in school improvement?

How has it changed the work of your administrators? Your teachers?

Is there a greater focus on goals, benchmarks, student achievement, etc.?

Do you feel your staff had the necessary resources and skills to implement your district's goals?

What did your district do to help you and/or others develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

Do you feel your school provided the necessary resources such as time, money, expertise to implement school improvement mandates?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of 2272?

Do you see this as a funded or unfunded mandate?

Do you feel school improvement mandates served to "jump start" your district's reform efforts or did it supplement what you were already doing?

Did school improvement mandates divert time and resources from other reform efforts going on in the district before they were passed?

Share with me the process your district utilized to implement school improvement mandates.

What were some of the supports to the implementation process?

Were these pretty much in place prior to school improvement mandates or were they more a result of the mandates?

What were some of the barriers to the implementation process?

Are these much the same barriers both before and after the mandates?

What might you suggest to do differently the next time around?

Why do you think the legislature enacted school improvement mandates?

What do you think they saw as the need?

Do you think they are getting what they hoped for?

From your experience with the school improvement process, what do you recommend to legislators about how to make legislation helpful to districts?

What would you recommend to legislators in future implementation efforts?

Appendix D
House File 2272

HOUSE FILE 2272

AN ACT

REQUIRING THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TO ADOPT RULES
RELATING TO THE INCORPORATION OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT INTO THE EDUCATION STANDARDS AND
ACCREDITATION PROCESS.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF IOWA:

Section 1. Section 256.7, Code 1997, is amended by adding
the following new subsection:

NEW SUBSECTION. 21. Develop and adopt rules by July 1,
1999, incorporating accountability for student achievement
into the standards and accreditation process described in
section 256.11. The rules shall provide for all of the
following:

a. Requirements that all school districts and accredited
nonpublic schools develop, implement, and file with the
department a comprehensive school improvement plan that
includes, but is not limited to, demonstrated school,
parental, and community involvement in assessing educational
needs, establishing local education standards and student
achievement levels, and, as applicable, the consolidation of
federal and state planning, goal-setting, and reporting
requirements.

b. A set of core academic indicators in mathematics and
reading in grades four, eight, and eleven, a set of core
academic indicators in science in grades eight and eleven, and
another set of core indicators that includes, but is not
limited to, graduation rate, postsecondary education, and
successful employment in Iowa. Annually, the department shall
report state data for each indicator in the condition of
education report.

c. A requirement that all school districts and accredited
nonpublic schools annually report to the department and the
local community the district-wide progress made in attaining
student achievement goals on the academic and other core
indicators and the district-wide progress made in attaining
locally established student learning goals. The school
districts and accredited nonpublic schools shall demonstrate
the use of multiple assessment measures in determining student
achievement levels. The school districts and accredited
nonpublic schools may report on other locally determined
factors influencing student achievement. The school districts
and accredited nonpublic schools shall also report to the
local community their results by individual attendance center.

RON J. CORBETT
Speaker of the House

MARY E. KRAMER

President of the Senate

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23
24 I hereby certify that this bill originated in the House and
25 is known as House File 2272, Seventy-seventh General Assembly.
26
27
28

29 ELIZABETH ISAACSON
30 Chief Clerk of the House

31 Approved _____, 1998

32

33

34

35 TERRY E. BRANSTAD

1 Governor